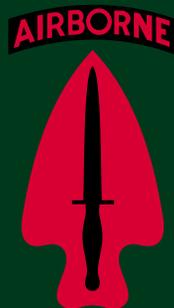


Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies

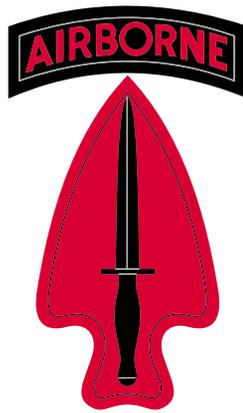
NARRATIVES AND COMPETING MESSAGES



United States Army Special Operations Command

Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies

NARRATIVES AND COMPETING MESSAGES



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Figure 1. Narrative trajectory of the symbolic story form, reprinted with permission of Dr. Steve Corman. The image appears in Jeffrey R. Halverson, H. Lloyd Goodall, and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2011), 20.

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

The Study and Practice of Narratives

Humans are bound by stories. Stories shape our internal sense of self, the cultures and societies to which we belong, and the knowledge that allows us to act within the world. No society in history, perhaps, was more bound by its stories than ancient Greece. The stories *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, still taught to schoolchildren today, are the epic tales that defined the genre. Undoubtedly, even then these stories made for rousing dramas when retold by orators or adapted for the stage. Yet the stories served a far more profound role than entertainment.

When reading other texts from the era, it is apparent just how important these stories were. One cannot read a work by Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, without encountering a barrage of references to verses from *The Iliad*. When the great thinkers from this era debated or discussed Greek society's most important values, whether justice, courage, or piety, the starting point was inevitably how these virtues unfolded within the dramas of these stories. Indeed, when creating his imaginary "perfect" state, Plato contemplated that one of the most important influencers to closely monitor was the poets, or storytellers. The ancient Greek word for poetry, *poiesis*, literally meant "making," alluding to how poets were the craftsmen of their respective societies.

The Iliad, in a fundamental sense, was ancient Greece. A young Greek man's longing for glory and honor in battle was first roused by hearing depictions of Achilles's superlative martial virtue in the epic poem. Throughout the young man's life, the great warrior would remain the standard in personal courage and excellence by which he measured himself. If he wanted to know how to sacrifice to the gods, and which ones to appeal to for divine favor before an important battle, the epic poem again set the standard for proper piety to the divine. It was in essence a handbook not only on how to be a Greek but also on how to be a *good* Greek. Martial virtue was intimately connected with what it meant to be an ideal citizen and man. *The Iliad*, consciously, served as one of the master narratives of this society.^a

In this regard, the Greeks were ahead of their time. What better way to teach the next generation about personal courage than recounting Achilles's bravery in battle against the fearsome Trojans? What better way to teach them about leadership and ethics than through an

^a The concept of master narrative is discussed in greater detail in the "What Are Narratives?" section.

exploration of Achilles's legendary wrath or his shame at the dishonorable treatment of his honorable enemy, Hector? The narrative of *The Iliad*, because of its dramatic setting, depicts the inner consciousness of its characters—their bravery, their motivations, and their internal struggles—more clearly than is possible in a textbook or a classroom setting. The narrative transports its listeners to experience the human condition viscerally.^b

Most of us today are probably less aware of how much we rely on narratives to understand our world than were our ancient Greek counterparts. After all, *The Iliad* does not purport to be divine revelation, like the Christian Bible, Jewish Torah, or Muslim Koran. Nor is it a treatise filled with the latest scientific evidence on the biological evolution of ethics. It is a story—a work of fiction—even if it does depict a historical war pitting the Greeks against the Trojans.^c Yet *The Iliad's* influence was not proportional to its measure of objective truth; rather, its influence was in its ability to motivate, inspire, and persuade its audiences across generations.

The Advantage of Narrative Studies

Many speculate that narratives are closely intertwined with human cognition. In particular, some scientists believe that narratives impact how individuals, as well as larger groups such as entire cultures, ascribe meaning to the world around them. As such, narratives shape our decisions and, ultimately, our actions. The very stuff of politics.

In recent years, military organizations and planners have taken an interest in narratives and their role in operational planning. When deployed appropriately, narratives are a force multiplier in efforts to shape, guide, and influence future outcomes in line with national security goals. The impact of narratives stems from several factors, including biology and social organizational dynamics, but also changes in the security environment after the end of the Cold War.

Recent research conducted by a network of neuroscientists and psychologists appears to confirm interpretive theories of human cognition proposed by other scholars in the humanities. Seminal works by a variety of these scholars have long argued that people package information in narrative form. The narrative form helps make sense of disparate information and give it meaning for individuals or groups.

^b *The Iliad* was meant to be recited by an orator or singer, not read by oneself in isolation.

^c Archaeological evidence indicates that the city of Troy existed.

This work discusses narrative research to better understand how narratives shape political behavior. Any political landscape is full of competing actors, motivations, and goals. Narratives are especially important tools for turning these disparate parts into comprehensible stories.¹ Political behavior ultimately results from the aggregate activities of individuals. It stands to reason, then, that a better grasp of narratives will illuminate the how and why of the political choices people make and the actions they take.²

Narratives are one critical component shaping the outcome of military engagements. Traditionally, militaries have focused on the impact of kinetic operations as the primary determinants of conflict outcome. Yet, as Clausewitz noted centuries earlier, war is an extension of, not a replacement for, politics. Studying narratives helps highlight the social and political dimensions of conflict that often remain overlooked when conflict is conceptualized in a purely force-on-force manner. Expanding analysis of conflict to include narratives makes greater inroads into influencing desired outcomes.

The integration of narratives into operational planning has been called narrative-led operations. Literal and virtual battlespaces are crowded with narratives projected by military forces, opponents, and local and domestic audiences. Most seek to influence stakeholders and key audiences in ways that favor their political objectives. Nissen argues that the recognition of the importance of narratives has not regularly filtered into military planning. When it does, narratives are used to support existing operational and tactical realities rather than in the strategic planning stage when they can inform operations.³

Because humans are the executors of political conflict, regardless of the form it takes, narratives loom large. Technological developments, especially social media, mean that the use of force is under near-real-time public scrutiny. In light of these developments, there is great need for a dynamic and compelling legitimation of a state's military action.⁴

Changes within the post-Cold-War international system have impacted political conflict in profound ways.⁵ Direct conflict between states' conventional forces has decreased. Clashes between large conventional forces have been replaced with smaller-scale asymmetric clashes. Most conflicts fall under the heading of civil war. But, nearly half of civil wars involve external state support, usually a neighboring rival, betraying the transnational dimensions of seemingly internal conflicts.⁶

Not only has the way in which conflicts are fought changed but also the way in which they end. Most are now concluded by a negotiated settlement that includes provisions for the rebel force to participate in the legitimate political process of the sovereign state. Negotiations are initiated by mediators from the international community or by parties

in the conflict. As a result, more resistance movements are taking part in legitimate governance than have done so in the past.

In these operating environments, persuasive tools take on greater importance for all parties. Insurgents need to persuade the international community of their legitimacy as political contenders. Domestically, they also need to prove their legitimacy and capacity to govern. Resistance movements might also seek external supporters, whether from states or from other non-state groups with similar sympathies. Above all, resistance movements need to persuade their audiences of the necessity and effectiveness of taking collective action to address the challenges and grievances around which the group has mobilized.

For each of the groups in this short list of examples, narratives play a crucial role in influencing outcomes. Conflict is inevitably bound with culture. Persuading local populations is a central part of the struggle. Narratives have their own form of rationality that relies more on cultural resources than on logical deductions derived from traditional means of understanding in the Western world.⁷ Narratives derive validity, and thus their persuasive capacities, from their internal logic as well as how closely they match the perspective of the intended audience.⁸ Moreover, narratives can use available cultural resources to present local and global events in a manner useful to achieving strategic goals.⁹

Summary

This study builds a basic foundation of knowledge in narratives. This foundation includes examination of how scholars and practitioners use the concept, a working definition of the term *narrative*, and discussion of why narratives are important to understanding political and social behavior. The structures and components of narratives that make them especially persuasive or successful are discussed, drawing on research from communications, neuroscience, psychology, political science, and other relevant fields.

Despite the volume of narrative research, the field still has limitations that are important for the practitioner to understand. Limitations are especially apparent in developing measures of effectiveness for narratives. Each section, where possible, includes pertinent examples to explain concepts. The examples are drawn from familiar cultures, non-violent social movements, and violent resistance movements alike.

Narratives permeate human experience, whether in the social or political realm or at the individual or group level. Doing justice, in detail, to all of the functions of narratives in political behavior is beyond the scope of this work. However, in this study we pay special attention to the role narratives play in one of the fundamental problems of political

behavior—how to mobilize people to participate in organized political action. The environmental conditions that can lead to individual grievances—whether lack of political opportunity, poverty, or human rights violations—are prevalent in many places in the world. The exception lies not in the presence of these conditions but in the rarity of organized political resistance to them. Where appropriate throughout this work, we focus on the role that narratives can play in overcoming the many difficulties resistance movements face in mobilizing others to join and support their goals.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES?

In the past decade, policy makers, academic researchers, military practitioners, and media commentators have increased discussion of the use of narratives within resistance movements, insurgent groups, and counterinsurgent operations. The concept itself migrated from other disciplines, particularly from research in literary and postmodern theory within the past century. Once the province of postmodern theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, the concept of narrative has become relatively commonplace in the analysis of political violence. The migration of the narrative concept to research on terrorism, insurgencies, and other forms of resistance is likely due to the importance of influence in the counterinsurgency model outlined in FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*. This model considers the local population to be the center of gravity because of the importance of its support for a government or rebel victory. Winning the “hearts and minds” of the population and their subsequent support is critical to gaining ground against the enemy, whether for a rebel group or an incumbent government. Effective use of the art of persuasion, then, is paramount.

The theoretical background of narrative research rests on ideas about how individuals experience the world around them and then communicate that information to others. Millennia ago, scholars thought that when we perceived things in the outside world with our senses, we directly experienced the inherent or essential qualities of things. Language was the means to communicate and comprehend essential qualities. Centuries later, the notion of essential qualities was discarded by many, particularly as it related to people and language. There was no longer any human nature containing core properties that all persons commonly shared. Instead, each individual was a unique manifestation and no longer considered part of a larger whole. Language did not communicate objective “things” that really existed somewhere “out there” but only individual interpretations of that reality, which varied from person to person.

From this perspective, social science research, which deals in generalities, does not have much to say about individuals. The pursuit of a single truth fragmented into a search for many truths and individual meaning. The fictional novel, as a unique, deep account of an individual's human experience, was regarded as the most appropriate material on which to conduct this research. Narrative research draws on the many ideas and concepts in this discipline, known as literary theory or literary criticism.^d

Despite the great interest in narratives, or perhaps because of it, the term *narrative* is used ambiguously. It is used to describe many different functions in relation to human nature, cultures, and organized groups. One purpose of this study is to clarify the narrative concept while providing common ground on which to debate this important topic. In this section, three perspectives of narratives are introduced. The first is at the individual or cognitive level. The next perspective looks at narratives in social/cultural group settings. The last perspective analyzes how groups strategically leverage cultural narrative material to accomplish their goals.

Three Perspectives of Narratives^e

The first perspective looks at how narratives operate at the individual cognitive level. Theorists and other researchers have long argued the importance of narratives, contending that humans organize information in this structure. Jerome Bruner, a psychological theorist, calls this the “narrative construal of reality.”¹⁰ Recently, neuroscientists, psychologists, and other scientists interested in cognitive research have tested this theory through controlled experiments, some of which are described in subsequent sections. The data emerging from this young research program support the idea that individuals store information in narrative form. Although promising, this research does have some limitations, especially in terms of operational relevance, that will be introduced in the “Limits of Narrative Analysis” section.

On an individual level, humans use narratives to perform important cognitive functions with social implications. Evolutionary biologists and psychologists look at narratives as a linguistic device that is an important aid for communication and social interaction. Despite the emphasis on narratives as evolutionary developments to help humans

^d There are many branches of literary theory or literary criticism with varied positions on these subjects. The intent is not to cover each of these but rather to provide the reader with a generalized sense of how narrative research first developed in the contemporary era.

^e Many thanks to Dr. Steve Corman for assisting in the development of this section.

function in society, however, narratives first develop at the individual level. Research has shown that humans are predisposed to hearing, understanding, and composing narratives from nearly the beginning of life.¹¹ Narrative communication in children is thought to evolve in tandem with a child's first memories.¹²

Kerstin Dautenhahn explains the relationship between narratives and social interaction in the Narrative Intelligence Hypothesis (NIH). In the NIH theory, individuals developed the narrative format to cope with social interactions that became progressively more complex as humans evolved.¹³ Narrative communication provided an evolutionary advantage to early man because it is the most effective way of communicating with others but also about others. Thus, narratives offered humans an efficient way to discuss third-party relationships.

In short, our narrative interpretations are an intermediary between us and the world. Oftentimes, it is difficult to really “know” something or make claims to “truth” in some matters. In our everyday social interactions, for instance, without an objective reality against which to test our interpretations, construing our reality through narratives helps us “successfully get from what somebody said to what he meant, from what *seems* to be the case to what ‘really’ is.”¹⁴ Narratives fill in the gaps of information about human motivations and meaning.

The term *narrative* is also frequently used to describe the reservoir of cultural material that forms over generations in every society. There is a near endless variety and volume of narratives in any society. Most forms of artistic expression—whether theater, literature, or dance—involve narrative. At an individual level, narratives are the stories that, strung together, form the autobiographies of our lives. At a group level, such as in a culture or society, histories, myths, literature, and other stories help explain and solidify group identity. They help bring to life the norms, values, and beliefs that separate the group from others. The ability of narratives to help form group identity and cohesion is an important part of mobilizing a target audience to participate in social or political activities, such as in a resistance movement.

Lastly, and most important in terms of operational relevance, the term *narrative* is also used to analyze the rhetorical strategies that resistance movements use to help advance their goals. When researchers refer to the “narrative” of a resistance or social movement, they reference this perspective. The process through which narratives are extracted from the larger pool of cultural material and grafted onto contemporary events is called vertical integration, discussed in the “Structure and Components of Persuasive Narratives” section. It is important to note that the cultural narrative material that resistance movements draw on was not constructed with any specific strategic

purpose in mind.^f Instead, the material developed over succeeding generations through a slow process of accretion.

Definition of Narrative

In this section, the definition of narrative that informs this work is discussed. Most often, narratives are simply equated with stories. Definitions of narrative tend to set the same parameters as those set out for stories. Problems begin to appear, however, when debating the basic components that make a story a story. Some argue that there is no set of conditions that needs to be met before identifying a text as a “story.”

Although it may be difficult to nail down an uncontroversial definition, there are some family resemblances across stories. At the most basic, stories are recitations of real or imagined events that contain a beginning, a middle, and an end. In turn, events contain actors, periods of time, and other entities or concepts related to one another through an action or series of actions.¹⁵ The plot driving the story contains an agent, or someone striving toward some goal. Many stories also contain an antagonist, or a villain or obstacle blocking the agent’s goal. These basic elements are present in most story forms, whether oral or written, contemporary or traditional.¹⁶ Thus, the term *story* refers to a wide variety of resources, such as news stories, family stories, online and postings.¹⁷

A minimal definition of narrative as a story, however, sets the bar too low. Using the parameters described above, a text or speech containing only three sentences could qualify as a narrative. The subject matter, arguably, probably is not especially riveting or persuasive if the narrative simply recounts our morning commute.

Halverson, Goodall, and Corman provide a more useful definition of narrative that views it not just as a story but as a collection of stories, or a “coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that serve a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations of its literary and rhetorical form.”¹⁸ The collection of stories in the narrative system are related to one another in coherent ways. The coherence of the system means that the individual stories elaborate and combine with other stories so that the sum of the narrative system is greater than its parts.¹⁹ When thinking about narratives, especially about their strategic use by resistance movements, it helps to distinguish this more complex variety from a simple story that

^f Resistance movements incorporate this material into their own narrative in a process called vertical integration, discussed in the “Structure and Components of Persuasive Narratives” section.

has only some elementary pattern of association. As a concept, narrative loses its analytic power if it is used to describe nearly every utterance or scribble.

Influential narratives embody some tension or struggle that needs to be resolved. These compelling “narrative realities,” as Bruner calls them, have some universal qualities despite the particular contexts in which they come to life. One of these qualities, Bruner argues, is the centrality of trouble. As he says, “stories worth telling and worth construing are typically born in trouble.”²⁰ The symbolic story form, depicted in Figure 1, explains how narratives using conflict as their central feature invite participatory action.

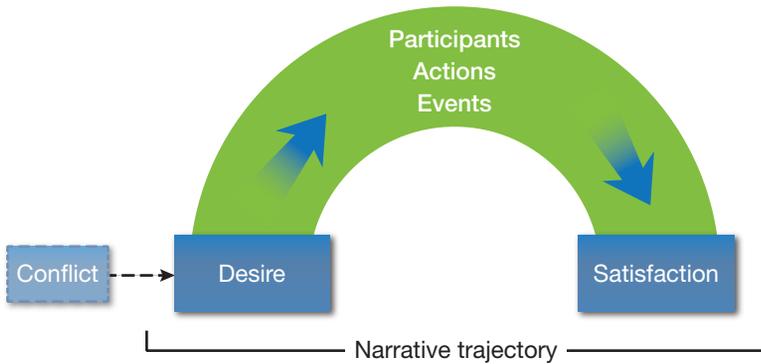


Figure 1. Narrative trajectory of the symbolic story form.

Unresolved tension or conflict in the narrative fosters a desire for action that can only be satiated when the conflict itself is resolved.²¹ The classic example is Adolf Hitler’s manifesto, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*). Hitler’s story created an unresolved desire for a German utopia. The story invited its readers to take to action to satiate the desire, namely the elimination of the Jews. The unfulfilled desire coupled with a suggested solution formed a powerful call to action among Hitler’s German supporters.

Narrative Classification

The discussion above demonstrates that there are different types and qualities of narratives. Some types or classes of narratives have greater potential persuasive power. Mark Finlayson and Steven Corman devised a distinction between different levels of narratives, further distinguishing the type of narratives of interest to the Special Operations Forces practitioner. Recounts of leaving the house, picking up milk at the store, or other everyday activities are classified as level I narratives, “a report of sequences of actions that are locally coherent

and connected, with clear chains of cause and effect concerning a set of agents and their goals and their motivations.” On the other hand, more engaging narratives, or those with persuasive potential, are classified as level II narratives. Although they have some structural characteristics of the basic level I narratives, level II narratives have added elements of conflict, drama, emotional intensity, cultural tropes, or archetypal characters.²² It is the addition of these latter factors that helps distinguish between powerful stories crafted by resistance movements and those used to catch up our friends or family on our daily lives.

Researchers also group narratives by subject matter. Georges Polti categorized thirty-six dramatic situations that commonly occur in most stories.⁸ One he identified, “Self-Sacrificing for an Idea,” is a dramatization in which the hero of the story sacrifices himself or herself for a higher ideal, whether honor or piety.²³ Similarly, Joseph Campbell found a consistent pattern among many myths, a narrative he called “The Hero’s Journey.” In it, a hero embarks on a quest in which he must survive difficult challenges for which he will be greatly rewarded in the end.²⁴ Mark Juergensmeyer outlined a narrative, “Cosmic War,” that is common in extremist rhetoric across the political spectrum. In this narrative, extremists believe they are acting as agents in a great metaphysical battle between good and evil. The victory of the faithful, which might happen only in the distant future but is a preordained fact, will result in the realization of God’s plan for humanity.²⁵

Narratives can also be categorized according to function in more discrete groups such as resistance movements. William Casebeer and James Russell identified two broad types of foundational narratives for insurgent groups: transactional and transcendental narratives. In the former type, the group emphasizes the benefits its members will accrue by working together, such as greater wealth, notoriety, or reformation of a state. The motivations in the transactional narrative are instrumental, or designed to satisfy individual interests. The other broad type of foundational narrative, transcendental, emphasizes “otherworldly goals” with no expectation of fulfillment in this lifetime. Insurgent groups, such as al-Qaeda, sometimes use these types two simultaneously.²⁶

Master, Local, and Personal Narratives

In broader groups such as cultures, narratives can also be categorized according to the impact they have on the norms, values, and beliefs of a people. Some theorists identify a metanarrative or a master narrative. Its role is to generate lesser narratives in society—the story behind the story. It is a series of stories that is deeply embedded

⁸ Many thanks to Dr. Steve Corman for bringing this source to our attention.

in a culture through continual reproduction, and usually reinterpretation, over generations. However, master narratives are not crafted by individuals for some strategic purpose. Rather, master narratives gain ground through continual repetition and the reverence that society as a whole has for the beliefs and values the narratives embody.²⁷ Master narratives help to form culture, those collective characteristics and qualities a group shares that distinguish it from other groups—that special something, for instance, that makes the French different from the Germans.

In the United States, there are a number of master narratives that help shape American identity and frequently appear in politics and public debate. Among the most familiar is the narrative that Robert Reich calls “The Triumphant Individual.” In this narrative, the little guy, or underdog, achieves success by working hard, taking risks, and believing in himself. He is rewarded with prosperity, fame, and honor. He is the prototypical self-made man who overcame tremendous odds and the doubt of others. Historical figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln epitomize the triumphant individual. In popular culture, the novelist Horatio Alger Jr. lionized this type of figure in his rags-to-riches stories featuring immigrant peddlers who became famous millionaires.²⁸ These master narratives, and others like it, are frequently wielded by the media and policy makers to support their positions or goals. Most recently, the Tea Party used the common trope of the self-made man to justify positions against social entitlements perceived as handouts to the undeserving.

Cultures and societies, despite having master narratives, are not singular or monolithic. Despite having access to the same cultural material (i.e., the same religious texts, stories, etc.), individuals can develop different interpretations of what it means to be a good member of their society. The boundaries of what it means to be an American are continually contested in the United States. Even with commonly accepted parameters of identity, sometimes well-established values within a single cultural system are in competition with one another. Take, for example, two commonly held values in American culture: respect for the rule of law and ensuring equal access to opportunities for the underprivileged. In current debates over immigration reform, these two deeply held values are in opposition. While some Americans champion ensuring opportunities for immigrants residing in the country illegally despite their illegal status, others argue for the necessity of upholding the rule of law and barring illegal immigrants’ transition to citizenship. Similarly, throughout the Islamic world, Muslims debate the actions and beliefs of “good” Muslims. Islamic extremists, who insist good Muslims are those engaged in violent jihad against non-Muslims, compete with

more moderate interpretations of what it means to be a good member of the *umma*.^h

In addition to the influential, widely shared master narratives, narratives are also present at the personal and local levels. Personal and local narratives differ from master narratives in terms of scope, influence, and temporal proximity to the communities and individuals that harbor them. Personal narratives are apparent at the lowest level of abstraction, the individual. The personal narrative system is the collection of stories an individual tells about him- or herself that forms the autobiography of his or her life. The stories might include tales of the first time the person fell in love, why he or she chose a certain career, or why he or she moved to a new house or city. As much as they recount the past, autobiographies also detail our hopes for the future.

The selection of the stories is as important as the content. We choose the string of events, happenings, and relationships that help us define who we are, and we communicate it to others. Local narratives include stories about events close to individuals and their communities that help flesh out the picture of the world as they know it now. For instance, local narratives might include stories about elections, assassinations, or natural disasters. Like master narratives, these local narratives help people make sense of the world from a localized or individual perspective.²⁹

The tension between the sameness of the cultural materials and the variability of interpretation is critical. It means that individuals and groups have the ability to alter or reenvision a society's norms and values. Not all such attempts, however, are successful. In subsequent sections, we discuss analytic tools, frameworks, and research from multiple disciplines and perspectives to gain a fuller understanding of when and why some narratives, and some political entrepreneurs, are more successful than others in changing the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of targeted groups.

WHY ARE NARRATIVES IMPORTANT?

Why are narratives important? Researchers from a variety of fields, including neuroscience, political science, and psychology, study the role of narratives in human cognition. Politics and political behavior are ultimately derived from the perceptions, decisions, and actions of individuals. Thus, narratives are crucial to understanding the behavior of groups such as resistance movements. Basic knowledge about

^h *Umma* is an Arabic term used to describe the global community of Muslims united by their religious ties and beliefs.

academic fields concerned with group behavior is helpful in understanding the impact of narratives on political behavior. Social movement theory, a branch of political science and sociology that studies organized political movements, provides a number of tools that are useful for analyzing narratives. This section discusses the general theories of narratives as they relate to individual cognition and group behavior and introduces the current empirical research and analytic tools supporting these theories.

***Homo narrans*: Narratives and Individual Cognition**

The common Latin term describing contemporary humans is *Homo sapiens*, or man the wise. It privileges the human's rational, or reasoning, capacity as the primary characteristic distinguishing modern humans from their hominid predecessors. Long before Descartes wrote his famous aphorism, "I think, therefore I am," great thinkers used this rational capacity to draw a line between the animal kingdom and humanity.

The terms *rational* and *reasoning* are usually associated with the scientific method. Through this method, knowledge arises from the iterative process of observing the empirical world and experimenting to check hypotheses. Any two people, using the same materials and methods, should be able to draw the same conclusion. This process of logic deduction, which creates knowledge on which we can then act, is the "logico-scientific" mode of thought.

In contrast to *Homo sapiens*, Walter Fisher argued that humans are best described as *Homo narrans*, or man the storyteller.³⁰ As discussed in the preceding section, narratives are thought to be a critical medium of human cognition. Narratives help individuals make sense of their everyday lives by developing a foundation of social knowledge. Without them, language is just a sequence of sounds:

Our ability to make language meaningful is the work of storytelling, an ability that allows us to recognize and make meaningful patterns of words, phrases, and inflections; to make and recognize common story forms and archetypes; and to be responsive to those patterns when they are communicated to us in fragments.³¹

In this regard, narratives are critical in helping individuals fill in missing information. Each narrative contains two complementary landscapes. The landscape of action recounts the sequence of events, while the landscape of consciousness attributes motivation and intention to

actors in the text. Narratives are especially important in helping us decipher the latter. In the “Structure and Components of Persuasive Narratives” section, we discuss the different structures and components of a narrative that facilitate this process.

The two different modes of understanding, the logico-scientific mode described previously and the narrative mode, appear to be at odds. This separation between the logical and mythological goes back millennia, with the birth of the first philosophical treatises of recorded history. In them, *logos*, or rational discourse, was privileged above the mere poetic or rhetorical in its ability to accurately comment on knowledge, truth, and reality.³² Both modes of understanding come from different ways of knowing what we know.ⁱ Whereas the logico-scientific mode of thought seeks to legitimize truth by the weight of empirical evidence, the narrative mode of thought is truthful in its believability or lifelikeness. It just fits with the perspectives or narratives we use to make sense of our world.

Consider the following perspectives on the movement of the sun. Many people at one time understood the movements of planetary bodies, the sun, and other stars through myths and stories. In the myths of ancient Greece, the rising and falling of the sun was attributed to the god Apollo, who rode his fiery chariot in a circuit across the sky each day. When the Enlightenment occurred in Western Europe, science displaced most mythical explanations. The sun is now as a star, fueled by colliding hydrogen and helium atoms, in strictly scientific terms confirmed through rigorous scientific experimentation.

The two perspectives in this example serve different purposes. The rationalist perspective seeks generalizable truths, or causal explanations, to predict observable phenomena. The narrative perspective, by contrast, seeks meaningful explanations. Understanding the sun from a rationalist perspective helps to generate knowledge about planetary bodies and enable categorizations and predictions about the natural world.³³ However, for the ancient Greeks, viewing the sun through the narrative perspective provided a meaningful explanation highlighting the power and majesty of the divine Apollo. It formed part of a larger mythic narrative that explained the relationship between the divine and human worlds and also described appropriate conduct and possible punishments against breaches of behavior.

ⁱ Some political philosophers categorize the difference between these two modes of thought as “reason versus revelation.” The competing perspectives have different starting points of truth. In reason, the starting point of truth rests on scientific or empirical evidence. By contrast, within revelation the starting point of truth can be divine or ancestral law but also, more broadly, tradition or simply “the way we do things around here.”

If we approach this narrative about the sun from a logico-scientific perspective, it is indeed factually incorrect. The sun is not carried across the sky by a divine being. However, the function of the Apollonian myth was not to identify facts about the natural world. Instead, it helped its listeners to understand the proper ordering of the world according to the tenets of their religious faith.

The persuasive power of a narrative does not derive from rationalist perspectives of truth, or fidelity referents in the objective world. Western culture tends to overemphasize and overvalue rationalist perspectives. Some philosophers of science, such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, have challenged the role of the scientific method in critical advances in scientific knowledge.³⁴ A clearer understanding of the function of narrative helps to explain why some resistance movements act in seemingly irrational ways. Insurgents might reject a negotiated settlement to end a conflict, despite the many advantages it offers, because accepting the settlement would mean discarding the projected future in the group's narrative.

The tension between these two modes is still present in American public discourse. Debates over instruction on intelligent design and evolution, for instance, pit Christian narratives derived from the biblical texts against scientific theories of evolution. Proponents of both sides seek to answer the fundamental question of where humans are from and where they are heading. Fervent believers of intelligent design and creationism marshal the book of Genesis and faith to support their arguments. On the other hand, as clear evidence of their assertions, equally fervent believers of evolution can point to an exhibit in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History presenting a tour de force of fossil evidence spanning millions of years. Yet debates between those holding these clashing perspectives are unlikely to result in any changed attitudes or beliefs because each side operates from different methods of knowing.

Narratives and Political Behavior

Debates such as the one over intelligent design and evolution point to the importance of narratives in political life. Narratives affect our perception of reality and in turn affect our responses and actions. In this regard, narratives "play a critical role in the construction of political behavior."³⁵ The use of narratives spans from the individual to organized groups, such as resistance movements, to entire nations and cultures.

Narratives are crucial to the formation of individual and group identities. They help societies answer fundamental questions such as

where they come from or whether they hold special status in the world. In an important sense, cultures are collections of stories transmitted from generation to generation. The stories give continuity to societies and cultures. Without the collection of stories, for instance, Islamic society would not have a systematic understanding of itself. And without these connections at an individual level, it would be difficult for Muslims to see themselves as part of the *umma* and to have a sense of purpose within it.³⁶ The same can also be said for the Christian and Jewish communities.

Individuals exhibit a fundamental need to “locate oneself in a story” in order to more fully comprehend where the world is headed and how they fit into that larger schema. This is readily apparent in the role-playing games children play in which they pretend to be adults by acting as if they are finding jobs or leaving their parents’ homes. Children’s play is a dress rehearsal for adult responsibility. Even as adults, we continue to imagine our ideal futures in terms of career, family, retirement, and other major transitions.

The narratives we construct for ourselves are in turn informed by the narratives dominating mainstream culture. In the case of groups that are excluded, these individuals might develop alternative narratives, and the subcultures that form around these narratives often help members of the excluded groups find their places in the world. Creating and transmitting these alternative narratives in the mainstream media is often an imperative for members of marginalized groups.³⁷

Narratives provide individuals and groups with a sense of purpose and place. However, when the common understanding that a narrative generates is contested by another individual or group in society, the narrative becomes a source of conflict for the contenders, just as in our example of the debate between proponents of evolution and those of intelligent design. As a society rethinks its position on critical issues, contenders may launch challenges to the stock narratives accepted by mainstream society. Narratives play a key role in formulating and maintaining a national identity. Stories about group origins and development permeate national narratives. Many such narratives are passed through the formal education system, playing an influential role in the development and sustainment of national identity. The importance of such narratives means they often become a topic of political debate.³⁸

The study of narratives is important for the Special Operations Forces practitioner because it offers one way for insurgent leaders to potentially overcome the problem of organizing collective action, a challenge well known to economists, political scientists, and others. In the 1960s, Mancur Olson³⁹ noted that rational, self-interested individuals will not act in support of a collective good or common interest when

it is easier to sit back, let others do the work, then enjoy the fruits of their labor.

It may be useful to consider several examples of the collective action problem. Consider, for instance, a collection of factories that emit pollution into the environment. The factory owners and workers, and indeed society in general, benefit from lower levels of air pollution. Yet in the absence of government regulations, each factory owner may refrain from assuming the costs of installing technology that captures air pollutants before they are emitted into the environment. One factory owner may reason that the other factory owners will adopt a strategy of free riding, leaving the original factory owner at a disadvantage because he or she has incurred the cost of the expensive technologies while others have not. Collective action problems are also present among nations that have banded together to provide for common defense. For instance, within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), US leaders have often complained about the free riding behavior of European nations. Government officials speculate that European governments spend less on defense knowing that the United States will protect them.

The collective action problem is a useful tool because it helps to explain the mobilization challenges faced by insurgent movements. One can regard the desired outcome of an insurgency, such as a revolutionary socialist government, a territory under sharia law, or a liberal democracy allied with the West, as a public good requiring self-sacrifice. But resistance is an inherently risky business that offers little probability of success.⁴⁰ This is especially true in the initial stages of a rebellion when insurgent groups are small and less powerful than the governments they challenge. Oftentimes, the risks mean that only die-hard activists, a small segment of the population, are willing to risk their lives. As a result, most opposition groups die young.

Groups use a variety of means to overcome this initial mobilization hurdle. One strategy is attacks against highly symbolic signs of state power. The attacks generate violent images that, whether correct or not, portray the insurgents' growing strength.⁴¹ When the acts are repeatedly carried out, people can be forced to choose between supporting a crumbling status quo or an opposition growing in strength. Many are driven to choose the latter option. Most people have a desire to support the winning side and be privy to the spoils of victory. Mobilizing can also lessen the chances of being on the receiving end of score-settling violence after the conflict has concluded.

Later sections discuss the means through which insurgent groups use narratives to change perceptions of a conflict. The distortion can compel individuals to sacrifice for the public good. This is accomplished

primarily by transforming individual engagement or action into one of personal meaning.

STRUCTURE AND COMPONENTS OF PERSUASIVE NARRATIVES

Vertical Integration

Resistance movements and other groups use narratives strategically to persuade their audiences to support their goals. In the case of Islamic extremist groups, these goals include resisting foreign invaders, rebuking or discrediting apostate leaders of Muslim countries, and arresting the decline of Islamic civilization by reinstating a caliphate and establishing sharia law.⁴² Researchers, Special Operations Forces practitioners, and others have long discussed the utility of cultivating narratives that resonate with the local culture. In social movement theory, which will be discussed later in this section, resonance is described through framing analysis. Other approaches, such as the process of vertical integration, help to unpack the process to more closely reveal the connections between a resistance movement's strategic narrative and the master, local, and personal narratives on the ground.

The vertical integration process is helpful in analyzing how political entrepreneurs craft narratives that appeal to targeted populations. In discussing this process, we will also touch on several structural components of narratives, such as story forms and archetypes that help narratives do the work of persuading. Halverson, Goodall, and Corman conducted an extensive analysis of vertical integration by studying the narratives used by Islamic extremists, which will serve as our primary example.

Vertical integration describes a process where political entrepreneurs knit master narratives with personal and local narratives to form a strategic narrative. Typically, the narrative links together a host of master narratives that have similar story forms and archetypal characters, terms that will be described in greater detail in the following paragraphs. The process of vertical integration helps individuals make sense of their personal narratives through a lens that better serves the goals of the resistance movement, be it the goals of Islamic extremists or more benign goals associated with human rights groups. In addition, the interpretative lens positions the resistance movement to address the crises or problems identified in the narrative.

The narrative systems that resistance groups adopt are similar to an ideology, although the latter term does not fully capture the strategic use of narratives. Looking more closely at ideologies can help better articulate the components that are typically part of a narrative system. Francisco Sanín and Elisabeth Wood, scholars of political conflict, define ideology as “a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group); an enunciation of the grievance or challenges the group confronts; the identification of objectives on behalf of the group (political change—or defense against its threat); and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action.”⁴³ Following this definition of ideology, the core components of a narrative system would include in-group and out-group distinctions, an outline of the problem or crisis, and a prescription of action for overcoming the challenges identified by the resistance movement.

The story form is a critical structural component of master narratives that helps resistance movements craft their strategic communications. Another term commonly used to describe this concept is *genre*. A story form or genre is a standard pattern on which stories may be based. The pattern includes stock characters, a set of actions, and a sequence of events in a story.⁴⁴ Story forms or genres are commonly articulated and understood in a culture. It would not be a stretch to conclude that all cultures and languages include some common story forms and genres:

Even the most sophisticated cultures cannot resist the siren call of the genres they construct: “reality” by fiat or even by statue is made to imitate our literary genres. We people our world with characters out of narrative genres, make sense of events by assimilating them to the shape of comedy, tragedy, irony, romance.⁴⁵

American culture abounds with story forms, some as simple as the bad-boy-meets-good-girl plot. Figuring out the plot and the actions of the stock characters in dramas or romantic comedies based on this story form is a simple matter for most viewers. The story form creates expectations about what is likely to happen as the plot unfolds.

Narrative systems that resistance groups use to justify their actions and mobilize supporters make use of archetypal characters.^j As the term suggests, archetypal characters are the standard characters someone from the culture might expect to find in a story. Archetypal characters encompass the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” Oftentimes, the stock characters are used as a shorthand, or symbol, for motives

^j Dr. Steve Corman clarified this point in a personal communication.

typically associated with the characters. Common archetypal characters include the trickster and the femme fatale who operate as deceivers in many stories.

Each master narrative has an accompanying story form and archetypal characters. In their analysis of Islamic extremism, Halverson, Goodall, and Corman identified thirteen master narratives.^k Only some of these master narratives are discussed here. Woven together in various combinations, these master narratives provide the basis for the rhetorical vision outlined by Islamic insurgents.^l In the Pharaoh master narrative, the story form is the conflict with God. This story form recounts God's punishment of the Egyptian Pharaoh who failed to obey God's edicts. The archetypal character of the Pharaoh represents the tyrant who is out to subjugate or enslave a godly people. When a resistance movement describes a contemporary leader as a pharaoh, it is consciously recasting the leader into this role, encouraging its audience to view the leader as a godless tyrant deserving of God's punishment to be meted out by the group and its followers.

The master narratives help define the key grievances and challenges identified by the insurgent group. In the Hypocrites narrative, the world is beset by tricksters looking for opportunities to undermine Islam. The Crusader and Tatar narratives are frequently used to interpret the contemporary world in this light. In each, a champion, by dint of godly virtue and faith, overcomes foreign invasion forces that have desecrated and destroyed Muslim lands and restores the Islamic social order. In these master narratives, the archetypal characters of the crusader and the champion play an important role. Thus, these master narratives suggest not only the grievances or challenges but also a potential program of action. Several other master narratives, such as Hypocrites and 1924, use the ruse story form that accentuates the forces of deception aligned against the true believers of Islam. Only through concerted vigilance, and the assistance of God, can such forces be overcome.

Other master narratives and story forms highlight the positive role of self-sacrifice in overcoming the challenges facing Islam. The story form of self-sacrifice is especially prominent in the master narratives of the Seventy-two Virgins and the Battle of Karbala. Heroic actions, although they may result in death, help overcome the enemies of Islam. Rewards for such service manifest in the afterlife but also in

^k For a full list of these master narratives, please see Halverson, Goodall, and Corman, Table 14.⁴⁶

^l See Halverson, Goodall, and Corman, "Chapter 14: Master Narratives and Strategic Communication," for an extended analysis of the process of vertical integration in Islamic extremism, treated only briefly in this section.⁴⁷

the remembrance and honor the larger Islamic community gives to the martyr. A closely linked story form is Deliverance, which highlights the rescue of unfortunate victims by a righteous hero, usually Mohammed, such as when the prophet rescued Arabs from the state of pagan ignorance, or *jahiliyyah*, by sharing with them the true revelations of God.^m The master narratives of Islamic extremism abound with the archetypal characters of the prophet and the martyr.

Together, these master narratives, through their story forms and archetypal characters, provide the rationale for the program of action outlined by Islamic extremism—jihad. They offer powerful incentives for struggle, even against overwhelming odds, both by promising eternal rewards in the afterlife and by emphasizing the inscrutability of God's will. No man can know the will of God, who might choose to deliver victory to the righteous at any time. Thus, victory is possible, even against overwhelming odds. According to this powerful rhetorical vision, participation in jihad is a classic win-win situation. Mujahideen are either the agents of God who bring about his victory in the here and now or the recipients of great rewards in the afterlife in the case of death.

To reach their goals, resistance movements use vertical integration to recast personal and local narratives in light of a culture's master narratives. The skillful combination of master narratives with similar story forms and archetypal characters that logically and emotionally fit the recipients provides the audience with resources to make sense of themselves and their world and to determine how to properly act under these circumstances. Political entrepreneurs are able to recast personal and local narratives through a class of arguments that draws similarities between situations in the current world and situations described in a culture's master narrative. It is a process that links the known past with the uncertain present.

Persuasive Arguments in Narratives

As discussed earlier, narrative arguments are not typically based on rigorous forensics or rational deduction. Instead, these arguments are based on loose comparisons reached by common sense. These comparisons include the argument from the analogy, in which an event, person, or other contemporary target is shown to have properties similar to an analogue of a master narrative. For instance, extremists often draw analogies between current Western and Islamic rulers and the

^m The Deliverance narrative also underlies the Jewish and Christian story form in the tale of David and Goliath.

Pharaoh, the Egyptian tyrant bent on enslaving godly people. The rule of Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president assassinated by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1981, was compared to the rule of the tyrannical Pharaoh. Like the Pharaoh, Sadat refused to obey God's will and was brought to justice by God's agent, a role fulfilled by the prophet Moses in the original story and by Muslim Brotherhood members in the contemporary era.⁴⁸

Another example is the argument from a parallel case, which makes the claim that a current situation is similar to a past situation in a culture's master narrative. Because of the similarity, one can assume both have similar attributes as well as similar outcomes. For instance, Sayyid Qutb, in his highly influential 1964 book, *Milestones*, made a parallel argument between the period of pagan ignorance in the Arab world before God's revelation carried by the Prophet Mohammed and the regimes of current rulers in Islamic countries. He extended the notion of pagan ignorance in the Arab world, *jahiliyyah*, to the contemporary world. Like the early Arab world, Qutb's civilization was in decline and in need of deliverance. Whereas the Prophet Mohammed acted as God's agent in the preceding generation, devout Muslims could likewise act to deliver the contemporary world from its woeful ignorance and restore to it the splendor of the world of the Prophet's time.

Narrative Probability and Fidelity

The persuasive capacity of narratives also hinges on other indicators of validity, including coherence and fidelity. Audiences are more likely to be persuaded by strategic narrative communication that exhibits these characteristics. A narrative has coherence when the collection of stories composing the narrative forms a cohesive argument. Coherence is also apparent when the materials a narrative uses to communicate a message fit well with other closely related stories. When comparing a narrative with other material, it should not reveal distortions, factual errors, omissions, and the like. Finally, coherence also relates to the author or narrator of the story. The author should be seen to embody the values he or she is putting forward in the narrative.⁴⁹

However, narratives should also reflect the way in which the audience understands the world—the narrative's fidelity.⁵⁰ Fidelity often results from narratives depicting archetypal conflicts, inspiring a shared desire among the audience for resolution. These conflicts, and the yearning for resolution, reflect the human condition spanning cultural and temporal boundaries. Most everyone yearns for security, happiness, and prosperity, but many people in their everyday lives experience threats to these basic desires. Narratives help people manage and make sense

of these threats. Natural disasters, for instance, might be attributed to a deity in retribution for or in response to actions taken by a society.

NEUROSCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS INTO EFFECTIVE NARRATIVES

Advanced, quality intelligence and analysis are core competencies in narrative development and operational success. Researchers have made significant progress in exploiting data from social networks and various other sources to yield rich insights regarding communication preferences and opportunities for disseminating narratives. Yet, these technological achievements, combined with knowledge gained from in-depth analysis of historical accounts of effective military information operations, are not sufficient to inform today's challenges to narratives. One critical gap in understanding narratives is the inability to predict how people react to specific, operationally relevant narrative messaging.

Effective narratives are those that produce the desired behavioral outcome. From an operational perspective, then, it is necessary to construct narratives whose behavioral impact can be predicted and measured. In this section, neuroscientific research related to persuasive communication in general is discussed. Although the research was not specifically conducted on the narrative systems of concern to this work, the evidence is nonetheless an aid to better understanding the relationship between strategic communication and behavioral outcomes. The final part of this section reviews neuroscience research more concretely related to how people cognitively process narratives.

In crafting an effective narrative, one must understand the audience's motivation, bias, and disposition, as well as their communication preferences. The insights greatly improve the generation and dissemination of effective narratives. Consider the implications of an operator who is equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools to leverage intelligence about all of the following:

- Key stakeholders or a community of interest
- Narrative elements and strategies
- Interaction of people's attitudes, beliefs, and past or current behaviors in response to various messaging
- Measures of effectiveness

These capabilities would enable more accurate generation, dissemination, and evaluation of narratives, as well as course correction of information operations. Tactically efficient, effective, and measurable narratives would be deployed. In this regard, nonkinetic approaches can effectively nest with more kinetic approaches.

The neuroscience community is trying to illuminate the underlying neural processes of persuasion, particularly those associated with specific behavioral outcomes. The research is helping to identify which components of narratives reliably activate particular parts of the brain. Identifying the area of brain activation helps predict behavioral outcomes because certain behaviors are expected according to the area of the brain being activated. Interpreting and translating this research for the information operations community better equips policy makers and operators to design narratives that prompt a desired behavior.

Persuasive Communication and Behavioral Outcomes

Neuroscientific approaches are an important contribution to understanding narratives and persuasive communication. The research incorporates experimental design missing in much of the social science research available. The methods used offer greater insight into the underlying brain activity and biophysical responses (e.g., cardiovascular, electrodermal, neuroendocrine, and eye movement behaviors) that occur when an individual engages with messaging or communication. Investigators have used this approach to examine questions about motivation, emotion, decision making, economic exchange, trust, perceived expertise, social isolation, and group influence as moderators of behavior. Experts are theorizing about what makes a message effective for small groups by studying the neurobiology of an individual.

The neuroscience-based communications literature describes bibehavioral and other measures being used to validate self-reported behavioral changes. Objective measures are better predictors of behavioral change than self-reporting. In other words, people might accurately report their intentions at the time, but the intentions reported beforehand do not always match a person's later behavior. For example, people might self-report intentions to vote, quit smoking, or lose weight but then choose not to follow through with the intended behavior.

During one study researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging to examine smokers' neural responses to watching anti-smoking public service announcements (PSAs).⁵¹ After the smokers viewed the PSAs, the researchers asked them whether they intended to quit smoking. One month later, researchers again asked participants about their intentions to quit and about their current smoking behaviors. In addition to asking them questions, investigators obtained urine samples from the study participants so that they could objectively measure reductions in nicotine and validate the relationship among brain activation, reported intention to quit smoking, and actual smoking cessation. The researchers were able to identify the unique neural

activation pattern (in response to the PSAs) associated with individuals who reported their intention to quit smoking and who also showed lower nicotine levels during the follow-up. In turn, researchers were able to distinguish this pattern from the neural activation pattern observed in those who had reported an intention to quit smoking but in fact had not reduced their tobacco use (according to the urinalysis).

The revelation of the neural “signature” associated with those who reduced their tobacco consumption in response to viewing the PSAs could help future efforts to construct effective anti-tobacco-smoking messages. The biochemical outcome data, the level of nicotine in the participants’ urine, was the ground-truth measure for depicting the effectiveness of the message. Unfortunately, not all messages or narratives lend themselves to a biochemical or biophysical ground truth.

People constantly take in messaging stimuli. Furthermore, individuals make decisions about future behavior after processing those stimuli. But what occurs in the brain during that process? For example, how can we construct narratives to reduce the audience’s likelihood of joining a resistance movement or increase their likelihood of participating for the first time in a national vote or reporting a violent extremist to authorities? Researchers know that digestion of a message likely requires processes involving cognition, emotion, decision making, identity formation, and memory, but they do not yet understand exactly how these factors interact in general and, more importantly, which specific elements of communications engage certain neural processes for known behaviors. If someone reports feeling empathy when hearing a story about a child with cancer, that individual is more likely to engage in certain behaviors associated with that empathetic response (e.g., increased prosocial action).⁵²

Figure 2 is a pictorial representation of the communication process arc. Box A lists various narrative-related stimuli, whereas Box C lists various changes in behavior. In between the two is Box B, representing the brain. In this illustration, the brain works to receive, process, and react to narrative-related stimuli. Neural measurement (Box B) provides fundamental knowledge of the underlying mechanisms of narratives and lends critical, objective measure to understanding the relationship between A and C. Neuroimaging can assist in this effort, identifying brain activation induced by the recipient’s exposure to a narrative. In practical terms, operators need an understanding of how narrative-related stimuli can lead to behavioral change, but they do not necessarily need to know the precise neurological mechanisms involved. However, understanding how the narrative-related stimuli in Box A link to the behavioral changes in Box C can aid in narrative development strategies that will elicit a desired behavioral change.

These data should be the foundation on which knowledge, tools, training, and measurement of narratives are based.

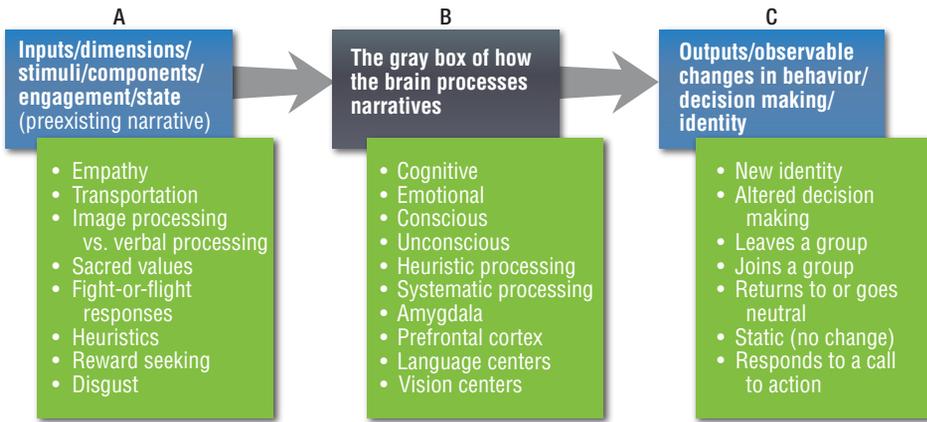


Figure 2. Pictorial representation of the communication process arc.

Persuasive Communication

A neuroscientific approach alone does not resolve all unknowns with regard to narratives. Rather, neuroscientific insights should be incorporated into the growing field of narrative study to complement insights from psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, communications, economics, and other fields. Integration of all these fields should lead to a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the efficacy of narratives. Understanding of several components is required to effect desired short- and long-term behavioral change:

- How individuals receive and process narrative input
- The role of individual and group dispositions, motivations, and biases in interaction with a narrative
- Key factors driving decisions and actions after engagement with a narrative
- The level of engagement with a narrative

The results from neuroscience research related to narratives presented below are not intended to be definitive but rather informative.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

The way information is presented can impact how it is processed in the brain. Visual spatial data are handled by visual processing centers that receive the data from the eyes and distinguish shapes, colors, words, and objects to inform, understand, and prepare humans to engage with their environment. Text, on the other hand, is processed in the brain

centers associated with language and speech.⁵³ Communications from the visual processing centers to the amygdala, the emotion-processing center of the brain, are speedier regardless of whether the person is making a judgment that involves an evaluation of emotion. On the other hand, when processing the more resource-intensive judgments involving text, responses in the amygdala are slower.⁵⁴ Word processing centers are located in the frontal cortex, a part of the brain associated with reward, attention, short-term memory tasks, planning, context updating, and motivation.⁵⁵ Resource-intensive processing necessitates more energy, requiring heightened blood flow in the brain. Compared with text, images require less energy, blood flow, and processing power to receive, process, and interpret. Researchers have described pictures as the cognitive glue that connects events to an image-based narrative and increases the intensity of evaluations based on that narrative.⁵⁶

There is a clear distinction between reactions to image-based and text-based communications. The brain areas that process images have speedier connections with the amygdala. Image-based communications produce quicker and stronger emotional reactions than do text-based narratives. The latter require more energy and processing power because of the slower connection between the language centers and the amygdala. In general, text-based messages produce slower and weaker emotional reactions. Functionally, this means that images can be used to elicit quicker and stronger emotional reactions than can be elicited by verbal or textual stimuli. Alternatively, when less-emotional reactions are desired, a text-based narrative is the better choice.

One can see how this plays out in advertising and marketing. Competing brands carry out a war of images rather than words. Budweiser associates itself with Clydesdales, and Coors responds by associating itself with the Rocky Mountains. Coors does not respond with eloquently worded explanations about how its product is superior. As one major marketing firm put it, “it’s very hard to convince people using words when their organ of decision is primarily visual.”⁵⁷ This particular firm advised its clients to make their marketing stimuli more visual and less verbal, drawing on the research described herein and noting that the areas in the brain that controlling vision are older (from an evolutionary perspective) and more numerous than those processing language.⁵⁸

Sacred Values

Sacred values are resolute values not susceptible to trade-offs with other values. They might be beliefs that a person would not change or forsake in exchange for money or other material goods. Messages that target one or more of an individual’s sacred values have an impact on the individual’s interpretation of events.⁵⁹ For example, a moral

dilemma, such as seeing a person steal merchandise from a store, may challenge one's sacred values. An offer to share the stolen goods as an incentive to ignore the theft may backfire because the observer may hold honesty as a sacred value that transcends economic exchange values. Sacred values can include religious beliefs, national and ethnic identities, or morals.⁶⁰

Neuroscience evidence indicates that when individuals process statements concerning sacred values, neural systems are engaged to process evaluations of right versus wrong (temporoparietal junction) and to perform semantic rule retrieval. Semantic rule retrieval occurs when the brain retrieves a rule or value that has been ingrained to correspond with a specific situation, such as how to respond to a salute. The areas of the brain responsible for utility and cost–benefit evaluations are not engaged, suggesting that some values are simply nonnegotiable because they are knowledge independent of context. Accordingly, attempts to “bargain” with these values will generally fail from the start because the parts of the brain that consider alternatives and weigh options are not engaged. Instead, those parts of the brain that determine what is morally right and wrong and call on automatic rules of response are fully engaged.

In fact, researchers suggest that efforts to alter sacred values generate hostility in the target audience.⁶¹ This is explained in part as evolutionary biology and in part as genetic predisposition to holding intolerant attitudes. The evolutionary biology theory indicates that sacred values are group based and that people consider their group very important. Therefore, people will maintain the group's integrity by upholding and defending the group's sacred values⁶² even when those values are irrational.⁶³ Basically, just as a person would physically defend his or her group against physical threats, a person committed to a sacred value will defend his or her group against psychological and moral threats. In terms of genetic predisposition, individual differences in tolerance are genetically informed, meaning genetics do not necessarily dictate how tolerant a person is but do inform an individual's likelihood to react violently when threatened either physically or psychologically.⁶⁴

With regard to narratives, these findings suggest that audiences may not be open to new ideas and different values. A common misconception is that every society introduced to liberal democracy will alter its values to match those most common in a liberal democracy. Yet, because efforts to change a group's values can represent a threat to the group in the same way as a physical threat, suggestions for change can be perceived as threats or attacks. It is just as important not to threaten a group's sacred values as it is not to threaten its physical safety. Narratives that advocate or are perceived to advocate altering fundamental,

sacred values are neurologically blocked. It may be more effective for the operator to either connect the proposed values to existing sacred values or avoid sacred values altogether. Researchers do not fully understand how to motivate people to change sacred values. Understanding approaches that are effective in changing sacred values would be invaluable to advancing effective messaging.

Fight or Flight

As noted in the preceding section, individuals generally react to psychological and moral threats to their groups and their values in the same way they react to physical threats, namely with hostility. As discussed, researchers propose that this reaction occurs in part because issues involving sacred values bypass the cost-benefit analysis processing center in the brain and instead use the moral reasoning and automatic rule retrieval areas. Researchers have also shown that hostile responses to arguments may occur as part of a fight-or-flight response driven by fear and emotion processing in the amygdala, the area of the brain that regulates emotional responses. Projections between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala facilitate the interaction of cognitive and emotion/fear processing, respectively.⁶⁵ Consider a high school basketball player who performs well in practice but on championship game day is nervous and does not play well. There have been no changes in the player's understanding of the game of basketball or how to play it, but the emotion and stress of the championship game interferes with and reduces the player's performance. Likely, the drive from the amygdala (the fear- and emotion-processing area) overrides that of the prefrontal cortex (the decision-making area),⁶⁶ allowing emotion/fear to contribute to the player's performance, as evidenced by his reduced performance.

Some emotional responses, such as fear or anger, engage the sympathetic nervous system, resulting in measurable physiological responses. The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for regulating body functions such as heart rate, sweating, and digestion in response to perceived harm or threats.⁶⁷ This process is often called the fight-or-flight response. The amygdala, via emotion and fear processing, can contribute to engaging the sympathetic nervous system. Interestingly, physical threats and psychological threats are not distinguished by the amygdala,⁶⁸ and importantly, during fight-or-flight responses the body is in a state of hyperarousal. In such a state, it is common for higher-order cognitive functions, such as exploring the details of arguments, distinguishing friend from foe, or engaging in rational thought, to cease.⁶⁹

Encountering sacred values in a message disengages the rational components of the brain. The psychological threat engages the

sympathetic nervous system, which can lead to hostility. This concept plays an important role, with both short- and long-term implications, in messages. In the short term, the audience is not receptive to the message because it clashes with existing beliefs, and when that clash exists, the brain simply does not listen. Instead, it defends. In the long term, “unconscious emotional processing in the brain exerts a substantial direct influence on subsequent processing and behavior that is not always mediated by rational thought.”⁷⁰ This means that emotion processing in response to a narrative can have a substantial, direct influence on behavior, as well as on subsequent information processing. In this way, a bad first impression can lead to (1) behavior in response that is not tempered by rational thought (i.e., a heated reaction) and (2) biased information processing that creates a barrier for the persuasive message to engage the rational components of the brain.

Narratives and Information Processing

Scholars have categorized the way people process information into two possibilities: heuristic processing and systematic processing.⁷¹ Heuristic processing is similar to semantic rule retrieval mentioned previously. It leads to minimal independent analysis by the audience. Systematic processing uses independent, logical analysis of all components of the message, including the environmental context.

These categories represent two very different modes of processing information that communicators can leverage. A heuristic is a mental shortcut stored in the memory that helps a person reach decision more quickly. Triggering a cue is necessary for the heuristic to operate. However, because heuristics are stored in the memory, they are most often triggered unconsciously. This means that when one is used, it can unintentionally lead to a biased decision. One common heuristic is expert opinion. An “expert” label is the cue that unconsciously causes the audience to settle on the simple decision rule that expert opinion is trustworthy. Unlike people engaged in heuristic processing, those engaged in systematic processing intensively identify, assess, and analyze all the information presented to them. Audiences engage in systematic processing most often when there is no heuristic or mental shortcut to use. In general, heuristic processing leads to quicker decisions and actions, underestimation of risks, and overemphasis on positive explanations to justify decisions. A person’s emotional state also influences whether to use a heuristic or systematic decision-making process. Individuals in a positive mood are more likely to engage in heuristic information processing, whereas individuals in a negative mood are more likely to engage in systematic processing.⁷²

Communicators can leverage both of these insights according to their desired goal. If a communicator wishes to persuade an audience of a viewpoint, then he or she should aim to trigger heuristic processing. Additionally, because research has indicated that heuristic processing is more likely to occur when individuals are in positive moods, that communicator should either aim to deliver the message when the audience is most likely to be in a positive mood or embed information or opportunities to create a positive mood with the messaging. Conversely, if a communicator wants to challenge an adversary's message, he or she would seek to disrupt or disable the heuristic cues used by the adversary and pull the audience into systematic processing.

Emotional Content

Recent research has also shown that certain emotions communicated through messages can impact an audience's receptiveness to messages and likelihood to act. While hatred based on anger or contempt generally does not lead to violence or hostility, hatred based on disgust is more likely to result in violence and hostility.⁷³

The moral emotion of disgust elicits feelings of repulsion and elimination. In that sense, while anger prepares one to fight, disgust actually moves an individual to repulse and eliminate the cause of the disgust. As a moral emotion, disgust is processed in the regions of the brain devoted to moral beliefs and behavior.⁷⁴ Test subjects who had lesions on those regions were incapable of recognizing disgust in others or responding to disgusting stimuli.⁷⁵ Additionally, when disgust is focused on a group, all the members are perceived as innately bad and requiring elimination.⁷⁶ In this regard, disgust represents a boundary between inaction and action.⁷⁷

For communicators this means that disgust is the more effective emotion for persuading individuals to act against another group or to actively reject another message. Accordingly, narratives aimed at provoking action should focus not on anger or hatred toward the intended target of action but instead on disgust of that intended target. The origins of disgust that a communicator could leverage will depend on the communicator's cultural knowledge of the audience. Alternatively, if the narrative seeks to end violent actions against a group, the authors should design messages to undermine any disgust or contributors to disgust existing between the groups. If the moral emotion of disgust is the line between inaction and action, then much can be gained by facilitating or inhibiting feelings of disgust in groups.

Reward Seeking

Humans have evolved to engage in behaviors that result in reward and to avoid behaviors that potentially incur a loss. Researchers have discovered that when individuals perceive the potential for a reward, the brain's reward-seeking system is activated.⁷⁸ The chemical dopamine plays a significant role related to reward-motivated behavior. When dopamine is released in the brain, an individual experiences intense feelings of well-being.⁷⁹ The desire to feel the effects of dopamine release can lead individuals to engage in dangerous or sensation-seeking behaviors at the potential expense of their well-being. Indeed, researchers have found that individuals participating in reward-seeking behaviors have lower impulse control and enhanced reward sensitivity and are more likely to prefer immediate reward at the cost of long-term adverse consequences.⁸⁰ Some industries, such as the gambling industry, have leveraged these findings by designing their activities, services, websites, and interactive features to provide users with numerous small rewards, thereby engaging the reward-motivation brain centers and increasing the likelihood of continued engagement. Continually achieving low-level rewards maintains a user's interest, whereas requiring a user to wait patiently for a higher-level reward causes the user to lose interest. It is important to note that the reward can be physical, monetary, or social. For instance, receiving positive feedback to posts on social media sites can incentivize a user to post similar messages. Because positive feedback elicits dopamine and oxytocin in the author, his or her posts might grow more bold and extremist.⁸¹

Communicators can also leverage this understanding of human reward-seeking habits by designing messages that provide audience members with rewards. However, reward bounties are not the best strategy. Instead, practitioners in other arenas have discovered that small, incremental rewards gain favor and maintain attention more effectively than a large reward after completing a long, arduous task. Similarly, graphic designers have recognized that individuals are deterred by large blocks of text. Most segment the material into manageable portions so the audience is rewarded after finishing each segment, providing incentive to continue.

Narrative Transportation, or "Getting Lost in the Story"

Narrative transportation refers to the experience of getting lost in a story. The term *transportation* was introduced to explain that immersive experience in which, for all intents and purposes, one feels as if he or she has moved or transported out of the real world and into the story world.⁸² Scholars describe it this way because the hallmarks of transportation include empathizing with the characters, engaging in

extensive mental imagery of the story's events and surroundings, and losing access to real-world information both physiologically and psychologically.⁸³ Importantly, audiences that have experienced transportation return to the real world changed in strong and long-lasting ways.⁸⁴ Narrative transportation does not trigger careful evaluation or intense scrutiny of arguments.⁸⁵ This means we can have transportive experiences with content that otherwise may not make sense or be rational. Researchers refer to this as narrative persuasion, within which are two components, the affective and the cognitive.⁸⁶

The affective component refers to the empathy experienced by the audience. Empathy represents the ability to experience the narrative from the protagonist's point of view. With empathy, an audience does not feel *for* the characters but instead feels *with* the characters.⁸⁷ The cognitive component refers to the change in information processing. During narrative transportation, audiences experience decreased analytical processing.⁸⁸ Both components are integral to effective narrative persuasion. Unlike other persuasive media, narrative persuasion does not present arguments. "Instead, narratives present information and positions that are true within the context of the story."⁸⁹ Research indicates that transportation requires accepting the story's world and that transported audiences return to the real world without abandoning the information and positions from the story world.⁹⁰ It would seem then that transportive experiences engage our memory processing. Transported audiences disengage from the real world, engage in a story world, accept the story world's beliefs and positions as valid, and upon return to the real world maintain belief in the validity of those story world beliefs and positions.

Experts continue to study the underlying neurological mechanisms of transportation, but research has already revealed some key observations and likely explanations. For instance, while audience members are viewing a transportive narrative, their brains are less sensitive to stimuli that are outside the story world. In other words, the transportation experience consumes attention capacity, reducing attention resources available for current real-world events. Also, transportation is associated with reduced activity in the default mode network, the brain network activated during self-reflection and self-referential thought. The reduced activity in this network supports the notion that transportation is characterized by detachment from the real world.

There are also several common characteristics of transportive narratives. The characteristics are divided into those relating to the narrative and others relating to the audience. Narrative characteristics include identifiable characters, an imaginable plot, and verisimilitude, or lifelikeness.⁹¹ An identifiable character is one with whom the

audience can affiliate. If the character is foreign to the audience, then the narrative is less likely to be transportive. Identifiability of the character enables the audience to empathize and experience the story from the character's point of view and with the character's biases. An imaginable plot requires descriptions of settings and events along a temporal sequence, evoking mental imagery for the audience. As with empathy, it is through mental imagery that audiences engage with the story's world as though it were real. Audiences that do not engage in mentally imagining the narrative world and the plot are less likely to be transported. Finally, verisimilitude refers to the story's realism, but in a broad sense. Transportive narratives should emphasize believability rather than logical consistency and lack of contradictions. Greater verisimilitude increases the likelihood that an audience will suspend reality and be transported by the narrative.

Audience characteristics related to transportive narratives include familiarity, attention, and transportability. An audience must have some prior knowledge of or personal experience with the narrative's topic or genre to be transported by the narrative. The more foreign the narrative's characters, setting, circumstances, or topic, the less likely the narrative is to transport its audience. Accordingly, effective narratives need to be based on at least a minimum level of cultural knowledge. Additionally, an audience must be able to focus and concentrate on the narrative or have a motivation to pay attention to it. Distraction reduces the likelihood that the audience will be transported by the narrative. Finally, for an audience to be transported it needs to have a propensity for being transported. This is a matter of individual neurological capacity for empathy and mental imagery. The more capable a person is at empathizing with another or constructing mental imagery, the more likely he or she will be transported by a narrative.

TOOLS FOR NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

Social Movement Theory

Social movement theory is a useful paradigm to analyze insurgent narratives and understand how they promote collective action. This is particularly the case in a subfield of social movement theory that considers the concept of framing. Social movement theory was originally developed by sociologists to understand the formation and evolution of a variety of movements, such as the civil rights movement and the pro-life movement in the United States. Although this theory was initially

applied to (mostly) nonviolent social movements, the tools and framework are also applied to violent insurgent movements.^{92, n}

It is important to note that narrative, the subject of this work, is only one pillar of social movement theory. In isolation, narrative framing is unlikely to effectively mobilize without consideration for the remaining two pillars, political opportunity and resource mobilization. Political opportunity is a concept used to explain how the larger political environment alters the perception of chances of success or failure in resistance movements. The second, resource mobilization, explains how groups leverage existing and acquired resources, whether financial, technical, or organizational, that enable resistance movements to emerge and sustain their operations. In other words, resistance movements cannot rely on narratives alone to achieve their goals. However, where appropriate, we focus solely on the role that narratives can play in overcoming the many difficulties resistance movements face in mobilizing others to join and actively support their goals.

A fundamental concept within social movement theory is that of a frame. Erving Goffman first defined frames as “schemata of interpretation” that enable people “to locate, perceive, identify and label” events that they experience or are brought to their attention.⁹³ More simply, a frame represents a worldview or paradigm through which events and concepts are interpreted, and as such it represents a means through which meaning is constructed and “reality” is interpreted. Within the context of a social movement, by assigning motives and meanings a frame can help overcome the collective action problem that is inherent in many insurgencies. As such, Benford and Snow define a “collective action frame” as an “*action oriented* [italics added] sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization.”⁹⁴ Thus, collective action frames perform an interpretive function by simplifying and condensing the “world out there,”⁹⁵ especially in ways “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.”⁹⁶ A key aspect of a collective action frame is that it is “not merely aggregations of individual attitudes and perceptions but also the outcome of *negotiating shared meanings* [italics added],”⁹⁷ such as, say, through narratives, writings, and the exchange of ideas among a community of people.

Benford and Snow noted that collective action frames perform three core framing tasks, specifically diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing.⁹⁸ The first involves identifying

ⁿ The application of social movement theory to resistance movements was first advocated by several sociologists who argued that all resistance, whether nonviolent or violent, existed on a continuum of “contentious politics.”

the problem and its victim and attributing the problem to responsible actors and causes. The second entails specifying a proposed solution and a strategy for carrying out corrective action. The third provides a rationale for engaging in remedial collective action, including an appropriate vocabulary of motive.⁹⁹

Each of these concepts can be fruitfully applied to various insurgencies. For insurgent groups, many diagnostic frames are essentially “injustice frames” that identify the population from which the group emerged as a victim of what the group regards as a historical injustice perpetuated by some other actor. For instance, the diagnostic frame of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) encompassed a narrative that focused on the loss of Palestinian land to Jewish settlers; the displacement of much of the original Palestinian population to the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and surrounding Arab countries; and the establishment of a Jewish state on most of British-Mandate Palestine. In the case of the Shining Path, the diagnostic frame centered on the arrival of the Spanish and the downfall of the Inca Empire in the sixteenth century as the cause of the current economic and social misfortune of the indigenous population of Peru.

There are several things to note regarding diagnostic frames for insurgent groups. First, depending on the structural setting of an insurgency, that is, the evolution of social, economic, political, and international conditions from which an insurgent group emerged, history may or may not play an important role in informing a diagnostic frame. In some cases the weight of history will be heavy, as history will essentially provide the basis on which a diagnostic frame will be initially developed.

In some cases history will provide an “original sin” that will inform the initial narrative of an insurgency. It may also provide the set of actors as well as their corresponding actions and group grievances that populate the discourse of a diagnostic frame. For instance, the grievances that informed the diagnostic frame of the Shining Path originated from an event more than four hundred years in the past. In the case of Shia revolutionaries who flocked to Hizbollah in Lebanon and overthrew the Shah in Iran, an original sin from 1,300 years before (the death of Husayn ibn Ali in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD) provided some of the raw material that informed a diagnostic frame. In other cases history is less influential. The grievances that motivated the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta in Nigeria were based on the actions of the Nigerian government and not on, for example, the actions of the British during the colonial era.

However, to keep a diagnostic frame fresh and dynamic, an insurgent group may engage in “armed propaganda” to provide events from

the present with which to update the frame. The process is similar to vertical integration, described in the “Structure and Components of Persuasive Narratives” section. Armed propaganda actions help to produce new meanings and reality from which to generate an updated narrative. In one example, an insurgent group may take actions designed to lead to an excessively violent reaction by the government, thus calling into question the latter’s legitimacy. Or the government’s reaction may reveal its incompetence, leading the audience to question the government’s ability to provide for security (further undermining its legitimacy). As an example, at one point the Peruvian government’s response to the terrorism, assassinations, and sabotage unleashed by the Shining Path was regarded as incompetent and ineffectual, which in turn led to less support for the government and, in fact, greater sympathy for the insurgents.¹⁰⁰

Another important aspect of diagnostic frames is that they can be highly contested. Social movement theorists sometimes speak of a “social movement industry.” This mixture of various social movement organizations may engage in debates among themselves regarding the nature of the problem (i.e., the diagnostic frame) and, consequentially, what is to be done about the problem (i.e., the prognostic frame). For instance, a variety of Palestinian groups emerged to challenge Israel. Some, like the Fatah-led PLO, eventually came to recognize Israel and, consequently, developed a diagnostic frame that centered on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Other groups, such as Hamas, took a maximalist stance by refusing to recognize Israel, so their diagnostic frame is notable in that it identifies the problem as Israel’s existence rather than simply its occupation of a portion of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. These differences between diagnostic frames naturally lead to differences in prognostic frames (i.e., negotiations as opposed to perpetual resistance against Israel), and indeed such differences have led to internecine fighting between Hamas and Fatah.

A group’s motivational frame essentially represents a “call to arms,”¹⁰¹ and it is here where one sees an effort to overcome collective action problems. Clearly the motivational frames of insurgent groups emphasize the need to forcefully address historical and modern-day grievances. However, sometimes the most effective motivational frames are those that equate actions with affirmation of identity, personal significance, and even personal salvation. For instance, racial animosity against Peru’s white elite was one of the motivating factors behind the rise of the Shining Path. In meetings in Ayacucho, attendees often heard statements such as *necesitamos un gobierno de Indios* (“We need a government of Indians”) and *hay que matar a los blancos y destruir las*

cuidades que siempre nos han explotado (“We have to kill the whites and destroy the towns that have always exploited us”).¹⁰²

Another example is provided by Iranian clerics and jurists both before and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In speeches and through the bully pulpit offered by Friday congregational sermons (*khutbah*) reinstated after the revolution, various Iranian jurists and prayer leaders extolled the notion of martyrdom by equating self-sacrifice to an honorable death in support of the revolution. The exemplary martyrdom of the Shia imams at the advent of Islam provided the blueprint. The exhortations to martyrdom in the speeches and sermons were intended to mobilize sympathetic audiences to take part in collective action against the Shah’s repressive regime. Martyrdom in the defense of the Islamic government was therefore imbued with deep personal significance, as it offered a direct path to personal and eternal salvation in the afterlife and, in fact, a privileged position in the ever after right next to the pantheon of martyred Shia imams.

For instance, before the revolution, the discourse and work of Dr. Ali Shariati, an Iranian sociologist and one of the chief ideologues of the revolution, represent an exegesis in which the author expounded on the concepts of jihad and *shahadat* (martyrdom). In a speech titled “Jihad and Shahadat,” Shariati noted that a *shahid* is one who “negates his whole existence” for a sacred ideal and goal.¹⁰³ The canonical example is provided by the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, who “consciously welcomed death”¹⁰⁴ by choosing to fight the forces of Yazid, the Umayyad caliph, whom Husayn regarded as an illegitimate ruler. Shariati argued that Husayn chose to engage in battle knowing it would lead to his demise “so that [the consequences] of his act might be widely spread and the cause for which he gives his life might be realized sooner. Husayn chose *shahadat* as an end for the affirmation of what is being negated and mutilated by the political apparatus.”¹⁰⁵

The *shahid* prior to his martyrdom engages in collective action, even in the face of impossible odds, not only because of the propagandistic value of the deed itself but also because it represents the choice of death over dishonor. A *mujahid* (i.e., a person engaged in jihad) is a sincere warrior who fights for his or her faith but does not necessarily end in *shahadat*.¹⁰⁶ Thus, “*Shahadat* is an invitation to all generations, in all ages, if you cannot kill your oppressor, then die.”¹⁰⁷ Shariati called on Muslims to resist the corruption of society through *shahadat*, by seeking the “red death of martyrs” rather than to die the “black death” of cowards.¹⁰⁸

From the perspective of social movement theory, the invocation of Shariati to choose *shahadat* represents a motivational frame. Within this frame, collective action is encouraged because the underlying

individual act of self-obliteration is sanctified by its positive juxtaposition with the example of Husayn's martyrdom. In turn, the frame implies a privileged place in the afterlife with this most sacred of imams. The invocation of Husayn's example, embodying self-sacrifice for the Iranian Revolution and evoking deep personal significance, continued after the fall of the Shah, during *khutbah*, the Friday congregational sermons. Ram noted that prayer leaders often cited the following Koranic verse:¹⁰⁹

And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive and are provided sustenance from their Lord; Rejoicing in what Allah has given them out of His grace, and they rejoice for the sake of those who, being left behind them, have not joined them, that they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Koran: 3:169–179)

In one Friday prayer in September 1979, Ayatollah Sayyid Mahmud Taleqani, commenting on the preceding passage, noted that true martyrs find “delight” and “joy” in their self-abnegation because they are rewarded with eternal life by God, who takes care of all of their needs.¹¹⁰ In a sermon in March 1980, Hojjat al-Islam Sayyid Ali Khamenei, the current supreme leader of Iran, stated that “the martyrs are addressing us, [saying] ‘you must continue our way,’” and that they “want us to guard the heritage of their blood, that is, the Islamic Republic and the victory of the Islamic Revolution.”¹¹¹ Additionally, the martyrs are “encouraging us” to hold “the Qur’an in one hand and a gun” in the other, to “wage war against all plots and cowardliness.”¹¹²

In a sermon in October 1979, Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri, commemorating Iranians killed in combat against Kurds in the Kurdish region of Iran, noted that the former were “martyrs” who “drank the elixir of martyrdom.” As such, they were “gathered with the martyrs of the advent of Islam.”¹¹³ In other sermons, prayer leaders claimed that martyrs did not feel the pain of their mortal blows when they died on the battlefield. In a sermon given in September 1981, Hojjat al-Islam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who would become a prominent figure in the Islamic Republic, stated that “they [i.e., *shahids*] don't feel any pain when struck by a bullet, an arrow, a spike, [or] a dagger. . . . they don't see Izra'il [the Angel of Death]—they only see God.”¹¹⁴ In April 1983, Rafsanjani told a congregation that “once the bullet strikes the body of [our warriors] they are carried on the angels' wings [to paradise, where] they reside by the Prophet of God.”¹¹⁵

From the perspective of social movement theory, these statements represent the construction of a motivational frame with a clear message

and incentive to engage in collective action. Self-obliteration for the sake of the Islamic Revolution is a deeply personal act that is sanctified by virtue of its congruence with the exemplary action of the *shahadat* of Husayn ibn Ali. Additionally, *shahadat* in defense of the Islamic Republic will garner eternal life in paradise alongside the canonical imams of Shia Islam.

Social movement theory also provides a number of concepts related to processes of frame development and elaboration that may be useful to the operator in deciphering insurgency narratives. One such concept is that of frame articulation. Benford and Snow define this concept as follows:

Frame articulation involves the connection and alignment of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and compelling fashion. Slices of observed, experienced, and/or recorded “reality” are assembled, collated, and packaged. What gives the resultant collective action frame its novelty is not so much the originality or newness of its ideational elements, but the manner in which they are spliced together and articulated, such that a new angle of vision, vantage point, and/or interpretation is provided.¹¹⁶

Thus, in some situations, the narrative espoused by an insurgency reflects themes and ideas that are well known among a populace. Despite the audience’s familiarity with the material, the narrative becomes novel by virtue of how its component elements are woven together in a compelling story in which causality, attribution, and corrective action are clear and resonate with the target audience. The result is a social construction of a “reality” and meaning that may resonate with the segment of the population that an insurgent group wants to mobilize.

Before the emergence of the Shining Path, mestizos and Amerindians in Peru were aware of the accumulated grievances. They could readily see their inferior economic, political, and social status relative to the country’s white population. They also noted that their diminished status and prospects originated with the “original sin” of the arrival of the Spanish hundreds of years before. The novelty of the Shining Path’s message, though, was its ability to tie together, through diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames, the various elements of the circumstance:

- The nature of the problem and its cause (social, political, and economic marginalization brought about by the Spanish and their descendants in Peru)

- Corrective action (a Maoist insurgency followed by the reorganization of the political and economic system along revolutionary socialist lines)
- A reason for engaging in collective action (to restore the greatness of the Inca civilization that was despoiled with the arrival of the Spanish)

Another important concept is that of frame extension. Just as any effective marketing campaign tailors its message to different segments of the population, an insurgent group often tailors its message depending on the target audience. For instance, the Shining Path emphasized the lack of economic opportunities in messaging aimed at educated mestizos while stressing vague notions of injustice, racial grievance, and economic disparity in messaging aimed at highland Amerindians.¹¹⁷ In Vietnam, although the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF) was sponsored by North Vietnam, the latter as well as the Viet Cong hoped that the NLF would appeal to non-communist elements. Hence, appeals to non-communist segments of the population in South Vietnam stressed the NLF's independence from Hanoi.¹¹⁸

Lastly, another important concept that will likely be relevant for many insurgency narratives is that of frame transformation. Benford and Snow define frame transformation as the “changing [of] old understandings and meanings and/or generating new ones.” When history provides much of the ontology or raw material for an initial insurgency narrative, the narrative is likely to be replete with examples of frame transformations in which the crafters of the narrative reinterpret a glorious and mythical past to encourage desired collective action.

The case of the Islamic Revolution again provides a rich source of material through which to observe the elaboration of frame transformation. In particular, through their discourse, Iranian clerics strove to overturn a quietist tradition in Shia Islam that shunned activity in politics stretching back a millennium. Ram noted that this tradition originated in the middle of the eighth century when the sixth imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, forfeited his right to political rule and other political roles reserved for the imam.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the alleged occultation of the twelfth imam (the Mahdi, or Messiah),^o an event that supposedly took place in 873–74, depoliticized the Shia further. Members of the

^o “Twelver” Shiism is the largest branch of Shia Islam. As the name suggests, Twelvers believe in twelve divinely ordained imams since the Prophet Muhammad's death, of which Husayn ibn Ali is the third. The first eleven of the imams were persecuted and killed, although the Shia believe that the twelfth imam was taken into occultation by God in the ninth century and will eventually return in the end of days to usher in peace and justice throughout the world.

sect internalized the futility of gaining power, resigning themselves to suffering what they must in anticipation of the return of the Mahdi.¹²⁰

After the revolution Iranian clerics used the institution of the *khutbah* to overturn this passive conception of Shia Islam and to argue instead for its revolutionary nature. In some cases this argument was advanced through a contrast with different Western ideologies. In Friday sermons in September 1981, Rafsanjani criticized “the school of thought of Marx and Lenin” for viewing Islam and religion in general as an opiate that kept the masses subdued. For Rafsanjani, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 revealed the falsity of such charges, because it demonstrated that religion was “the greatest stimulant of the masses” and that Islam was the most effective ideology of revolution.¹²¹ In 1988 Khamenei noted that, as opposed to “materialist” ideologies (such as communism and capitalism) that view individual will as determined and thus not autonomous, Islam teaches that human beings possess free will and are autonomous with respect to their social action and choices.¹²² To support this revolutionary conception of Shia Islam, prayer leaders often cited Koranic verse 13:11, “Surely, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition,” and based on it Rafsanjani, in a February 1982 sermon, argued that “humanity is not a deterministic movement, but rather a voluntary movement that should be initiated by society, by the people themselves.”¹²³ Thus, according to Islam, “the basis of revolution and the condition for the progression of a revolution . . . is man.”¹²⁴

Iranian clerics also rehabilitated the earthly careers of various Shia imams. The clerics emphasized the imams’ steadfast devotion to God in their heroic efforts to establish an Islamic government, as opposed to their gloomy and sorrowful defeat against Sunni temporal power. In a May 1981 sermon Khamenei noted that all of the imams “struggled, they waged jihads, they endured persecution, imprisonment, banishment and martyrdom” for the establishment of an Islamic government.¹²⁵ In fact, prayer leaders depicted all of the prophets since Abraham as struggling against oppression and depicted the effort to overthrow the Shah to establish an Islamic government as a continuation of their efforts. One sermon from May 1984 noted that

Moses revolted against the Pharaohs; Abraham against Nimrod and the Nimrods; Jesus against the tyrants . . . of his time; and Muhammad . . . too, delivered the people from the hands of oppressive rulers. In contrast to what some self-interested people say—that the prophets had always been instruments . . . of oppressors . . . they always . . . stood up against the taghuts [tyrants, idolaters].¹²⁶

In August 1980 Khamenei noted that “our Islamic Revolution . . . was, therefore, a resumption of the revolution of the prophets, [because it] stood up against injustice from its inception . . . [against] the . . . oppressors who rules [*sic*] Iran.”¹²⁷

The canonical example, of course, is that of the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali. But rather than reciting the preexisting clerical view of the example of Ali, which stressed the avoidance of useless resistance (and of politics in general), Iranian clerics after the revolution reinterpreted the myth of the *shahadat* of Ali as signifying the importance of the struggle against perceived oppression and superior power. Husayn, noted Ayatollah Rouhollah Musavi Khomeini, the undisputed leader of the revolution,

taught us how to struggle against all the tyrants of history, showed us how the clenched fists of those who seek freedom . . . may triumph over tanks, machine guns, and the armies of the Satan . . . [Husayn] taught us that if a tyrant rules despotically over the Muslims in any age, we must rise up against him . . . however unequal our forces may be, and that if we see the very existence of Islam in danger, we must sacrifice ourselves and be prepared to shed our blood.¹²⁸

We can see, therefore, that social movement theory provides a useful framework to deconstruct insurgency narratives and understand how they promote collective action. Many narratives are likely to encompass diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that identify the nature of the problem as well as its victims and culprits, corrective actions to be taken, and a rationale for voluntarily engaging in self-sacrificing collective action to achieve a desired end-state. Effective motives will likely be those that imbue individual action with deep and lasting personal meaning, and signification of individual acts may be accomplished through the reinterpretation and glorification of an existing tradition.

Mythomoteurs and the Myth-Symbol Complex

In prerevolutionary Iran, Islamic political entrepreneurs infused important Shia cultural and religious symbols in order to persuade others to collectively mobilize. In the previous section, we explored how social movement theory can help us understand the basic components of this persuasive narrative. However, this phenomenon can also be analyzed within a broader process encompassing the construction and mobilization of a variety of emotive symbols to effectuate ethnogenesis and promote ethnic solidarity and collective action. In his work *The*

Ethnic Origin of Nations, Smith noted that many ethnic communities can trace their ideational origins to a living past consisting of a collection of myths, memories, values, and symbols, which he termed a “myth-symbol” complex. This complex contains a kernel, termed a “mythomoteur,” which helps constitute an ethnic group.¹²⁹ More specifically, Smith noted:

There is also an important aesthetic dimension; ethnic symbols provide satisfying forms, and ethnic myths are conveyed in apt genres, for communication and mobilization. As they emerge from the collective experiences of successive generations, the myths coalesce and are edited into chronicles, epics and ballads, which combine cognitive maps of the community’s history and situation with poetic metaphors of its sense of dignity and identity. The fused and elaborated myths provide an overall framework of meaning for the ethnic community, a mythomoteur, which “makes sense” of its experiences and defines its “essence.” Without a mythomoteur a group cannot define itself to itself or to others, and cannot inspire or guide collective action.¹³⁰

Hence, a mythomoteur is generative—it plays a fundamental role in constructing ethnic groups. Additionally, it emerges from a variety of media, including the written and spoken word, as well as from various cultural performances, such as plays, epics, and ballads. What are the contents of a mythomoteur? Smith noted a number of component myths, and narratives play a fundamental role in constructing and sanctifying these myths.

First, there is the Myth of Temporal Origins, or *When We Were Begotten*, and the corresponding Myth of Location and Migration, or *Where We Came From and How We Got Here*.¹³¹ Various ethnically based insurgencies contain origin myths that address these two questions. For instance, many of the European Jews who fought for a Jewish state in Palestine believed that the Torah provided the Jews with a “title-deed” to the land. The religious among them traced their origin to Abraham, a shepherd from Ur in southern Mesopotamia who moved his family to Haran in modern-day Turkey and then to Canaan following God’s revelation:

Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name and you shall be a blessing. (Torah, Genesis 12:1–2)

Based on these clues, scholars believe that Abraham made his way to Canaan around 2100 BC, although archeology has yet to confirm the historical accuracy of the stories told about Abraham.¹³²

Another ethnic group motivated by sanctified accounts of their temporal and spatial origins is the Sinhalese, who believed they were given a divine right to rule over the entire island of Sri Lanka to nurture and propagate Buddhism. The canonical text that describes the origin of the Sinhalese is the *Mahavamsa*, and it notes that the progenitor of the Sinhalese race, Vijaya, arrived with his followers to the island from north India more 2,500 years ago, precisely on the day in 543 BC when the Sinhalese believe the Buddha died. Indeed, the Sinhalese believe that the Buddha designated the island as a repository for his religion. The *Mahavamsa* has the Buddha stating:

Vijaya, son of King Sinhabahu, is come to Lanka from the country of Lala, together with seven hundred followers. In Lanka, O Lord of gods, will my religion be established, therefore carefully protect him and his followers and Lanka.¹³³

Other notable component myths include the Myth of the Heroic Age, or *How We Were Freed and Became Glorious*, the Myth of Decline, or *How We Fell into a State of Decay*, and the Myth of Regeneration, or *How to Restore the Golden Age and Renew Our Community as "in the Days of Old."* Readers familiar with the Old Testament will be aware that Exodus and the Davidic Kingdom represent high points in the history of the ancient Israelites, but there are a number of other examples of groups conceiving of a mythic and heroic past and offering explanations for subsequent decline and strategies for regeneration. For the Sinhalese, the ascension of King Dutugemunu to the throne in 161 BC is portrayed in the *Mahavamsa* in a heroic light, as it came after a long campaign against Elara, a Tamil prince from the southern Indian Chola dynasty. As the *Mahavamsa* stated "his war cry was 'not for kingdom but for Buddhism.'"¹³⁴

For some Sinhalese nationalists, particularly those who believed that the Sinhalese came from superior Aryan stock, Sinhalese civilization entered into decline with the arrival of vulgar Europeans in the sixteenth century. One such Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist who believed in the racial superiority of the Sinhalese over the other ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka was Anagarika Dharmapala. Writing during the British colonial period, Dharmapala noted that:

From the day the white man set foot on this island, the arts and sciences and the Aryan customs of the Sinhalese have gradually disappeared and today the

Sinhalese have to kiss the feet of the Moor [and] the dastardly Tamil.¹³⁵

How should the Sinhalese recover their greatness? For Dharmapala, the answer was simple:

My message to the young men of Ceylon is . . . Believe not the alien who is giving you arrack whisky, toddy, sausages, who makes you buy his goods at clearance rates . . . Enter into the realms of our King Dutugemunu in spirit and try to identify yourself with the thoughts of that great king who rescued Buddhism and our nationalism from oblivion.¹³⁶

Accounts of decline and strategies for renewal and uplift are also common among Islamic fundamentalist groups. Many argue that the decline of the Islamic world relative to the West was caused by the movement away from the true Islam practiced during the golden age of the time of the Prophet. Ayatollah Khomeini told his followers that Iranian people were “led astray, and your greatest misfortune is that you forgot Islam. . . . the most important cause of the victory [of the revolution] was the very same revival of the values of Islam and faith.”¹³⁷ In fact, for Iran’s revolutionary clerics, Islam had always been a revolutionary faith, and previous “court ulema”^p who had propagated a quietist version of Shiism were guilty of giving service to oppressive rulers, because they had “stupefied” the minds of the faithful by concealing the inherent liberating nature of Islam.¹³⁸

Another type of myth that may motivate various insurgencies, especially those that are ethnically based, is what Smith terms the “myth of ethnic election.” In this myth, a group is convinced of its own exceptionalism by virtue of divine selection.¹³⁹ The Sinhalese believed that they were entrusted with the development of Buddhism. This belief in their divine election proved to be an obstacle in their conflict with the Tamils because it contributed to the belief that any concessions to the latter would foster separatism and ultimately lead to the dismemberment of sacred territory.

Another example, of course, is the belief of religious Zionists. The Zionists maintain that God reserved the land of Palestine (and beyond) for the Jewish people, as indicated in the Torah:

^p Ulema are Muslim religious scholars with experience in Islamic jurisprudence, which in turn endows them with the ability to pronounce on matters related to sharia, or Islamic law. In the current context the term *court ulema* is an epithet, as it was used to deride previous religious scholars who counseled Shia against interpreting the tenets of their faith in a politicized manner.

To your seed [i.e. Abraham's descendants] I have given this land, from the river of Egypt until the great river, the Euphrates river. The Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaim, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites and the Jebusites. (Torah, Genesis 15:18–21)

Yet there is nothing unique about these two cases. In fact, Smith noted that beliefs in exceptionalism rooted in presumed divine election have been prevalent throughout the Middle East and Europe. In Russia, the Tsars and the Orthodox Russian clergy characterized Moscow as a "Third Rome." After its conversion to Orthodox Christianity by St. Gregory in 301 AD, the mountain kingdom of Armenia cemented a belief in its divine mission on the basis of it being the "first Christian nation."¹⁴⁰ Such myths, as noted by Smith, have the potential to mobilize believers for collective action:

In all these instances, myths of ethnic election have helped to mobilize communities and ensure their survival over long periods. Because the ethnic myth is a dramatic tale that links the present with a communal past, and one that is widely believed, it helps to draw the members into a distinctive community, conferring on them a special aura, that of "the elect." Through its symbolism, it strives to unify different classes and regions, spreading ethnic culture outwards from the urban centers and the specialist strata, who guard the traditions, thereby creating a more participant society.¹⁴¹

An accompanying belief is that of an "ethnoscape." Ethnoscapes are geographical spaces that, according to Smith, have been invested (through various types of narratives, such as epics, ballads, and chronicles) over time with powerful emotional connotations and cultural meanings for a particular ethnic group.¹⁴² Examples abound in history, such as "Mother Russia," Zion/ Jerusalem/Al Quds, Kosovo Polje, Ulster, Tamil Eelam (for Sri Lankan Tamils), and the entire island of Sri Lanka itself (for Sinhalese-Buddhists in Sri Lanka). An ethnoscape may be the resting place of "our ancestors" or it may also be the site where miracles allegedly occurred and prophets are buried.¹⁴³ Additionally, a territory may become sanctified as an ethnoscape over time if it is the site of repeated performance of sacred acts in accordance with a divine mission, where the territory itself is a reward for the faithful observance of a sacred covenant.¹⁴⁴

This collection of myths and symbols is a powerful pull on the consciousness of believers, who are sometimes willing to kill others and sacrifice life and limb to uphold such beliefs. Indeed, one theory from the field of political science, symbolic politics theory, argues that extreme ethnic violence, rather than being caused by conflicts of interest or uncertainty regarding the intentions of opposing groups or whether they can commit to a settlement, is actually caused by the presence of hostile myths of other groups (perhaps based in part on the component myths identified by Smith) in combination with fears of group extinction.¹⁴⁵ The Special Operations Forces practitioner, therefore, will need to be mindful of how adherence to powerful sacred myths can help overcome the collective action problem by providing a powerful motivation to engage in violent collective action to further the material or ideational interests of a particular group.

VARIATION OF NARRATIVES IN RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Narratives and the Life Cycle of Resistance Movements

Narratives serve different functions for an insurgent organization. In this work, we have focused on how narratives help such organizations overcome collective action problems. In addition to this important function, narratives crafted by resistance movements have numerous other purposes, including to indoctrinate new or existing members or to gain external support from a foreign state. In addition, the functions of these same narratives can change over time to adapt to different points in an organization's life cycle. For instance, the narrative an organization adopts when it first forms will be different from the narrative it uses to support itself when it has become fully functional and mature. Unfortunately, little research has been done on these important issues. In this section, we will analyze how resistance movements have adapted narratives to changes in both internal and external circumstances.

Numerous experts and leading guerrilla warfare theorists have developed models to explain the phases of an insurgency. Arguably Mao Zedong developed one of the most widely influential models. In his model, Mao describes the slow transition of an insurgent movement from guerrilla units to a full-fledged conventional force capable of defeating the incumbent government or occupying power. In today's security environment, however, Mao's phasing model is of limited utility. As discussed earlier, direct conflicts between states are rare. Instead, the overwhelming majority of conflicts are civil wars, or conflicts

between a non-state actor and an incumbent government (and less often, an occupying power). Furthermore, most of these conflicts are not terminated by decisive military victories but rather by negotiated settlements through which the resistance movements are incorporated into the legal political structure.

As a result, analyzing narrative variation according to Mao's model will not provide much analytic leverage in investigating how resistance movements adapt to such transformations. More resistance movements are being integrated into the legitimate political process than in previous decades. Although a thorough analysis of the life cycle of insurgent groups is beyond the scope of this work, other researchers have begun to explore how narratives vary according to the transitions that many organizations undergo throughout their lives.

One researcher, William Casebeer, has constructed an initial phasing model to analyze narrative variations.¹⁴⁶ In Casebeer's simple model, resistance movements begin at an origination point, after which they grow, reach maturity, and oftentimes transform. In the transformation stage, resistance movements might simply die. Others might be co-opted by the state and some, as described above, might be included in the legal political structure as part of a negotiated settlement to the conflict.

In the transition from growth to maturity, resistance movements require more robust capabilities to function. Casebeer has divided these into four main functions:

1. Support (resources)
2. Maintenance (internal security)
3. Cognitive (strategic planning)
4. Conversion (operations, shadow governance activities)

In a mature organization, there is congruence between these functions so that all work together smoothly to keep the organization functioning.

During each of these points during a group's life cycle, its narrative serves different functions. In the initial genesis stage, resistance movements craft narratives to mobilize followers. Most often, resistance movements craft narratives highlighting unjust acts or situations resulting from an incompetent or illegitimate government. Within social movement theory, these political entrepreneurs are said to use political opportunity structures. These structures are vulnerabilities within a political system that create opportunities for creative non-state actors to challenge the authority of the state. Commonly, these opportunities result from a decrease in repression that lessens the cost of organized political resistance or from divisions within government elites. Sometimes, political opportunities are single acts, or a series of acts,

committed by the government or occupying force that are especially egregious and are not promptly or effectively addressed. For example, in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and later the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA),⁹ cited numerous acts of police brutality against peaceful Catholic protesters in an effort to persuade the Catholic community that their way of life and neighborhoods were under attack. The acts themselves, and the IRA's skillful manipulation of the political opportunity, were critical in mobilizing the Catholic community to support the armed resistance of PIRA.¹⁴⁷

In the growth phase, narratives also help resistance movements by reinforcing or transforming cultural identities favorable to the goals and identity of the group. Similar to the concept of “frame bridging” described in the preceding section, resistance movements can adapt the narratives surrounding an existing identity to better serve recruiting needs. The April 19th Movement (M-19), an insurgent group formed in the early 1970s in Colombia, was especially adept at this practice. The founding members of the M-19 splintered from existing leftist guerrilla groups such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). To differentiate itself from these other groups, the M-19 crafted a narrative depicting the group as an exciting new alternative. The M-19 contrasted itself sharply with the rigid, ascetic, dogmatic FARC. Its famous tagline was “Revolution is a party.” This narrative strategy was especially important to the group as it operated in dense urban centers such as Bogotá. Its signature style helped to attract an avant-garde, creative membership that contributed to the group's skill in flair and spectacle.

During the critical transformation process, resistance movements use narratives to smooth their transition to different organizational forms. This is especially the case when an organization is transitioning to include a different set of stakeholders, such as when a group transitions to a political party in the aftermath of conflict termination. Instead of needing a narrative to mobilize a population to armed violence, the resistance movement-cum-political party now requires a narrative capable of mustering votes. In addition, part of this transition also requires demobilizing armed soldiers into normalized citizens. Often, this creates ample opportunities for disgruntled insurgents to form splinter groups that complicate the delicate process. An adept narrative and strong leadership are required to successfully weather the challenges.

⁹ The PIRA, which formed in 1969, was a radical offshoot of the IRA.

The M-19 was among resistance movements in the 1990s that demobilized to enter the legal political process a part of a negotiated settlement with the Colombian government. The final decision to demobilize and form a political party, reached in 1989, took many years. For decades, the M-19 had adhered to a deeply ingrained narrative adapted from the Cuban Revolution and other Latin American revolutionaries. According to this narrative it was imperative to commit to the struggle until death, just as many leftist martyrs, including Che Guevara, had themselves done. This narrative made even the mention of reconciliation or negotiation with the enemy anathema to many in the M-19.

However, circumstances in the 1980s altered how the M-19 perceived the utility of the struggle. This decade began the onset of the so-called “dirty war” in Colombia. The dirty war brought with it kidnappings, extortions, alliances with drug traffickers, and paramilitary death squads, all of which had a horrific impact on the civilian population caught in the middle. M-19 members later reported that it was difficult for many in the group to reconcile their part in the ongoing dirty war, which had killed thousands of civilians, with the group’s narrative of protecting ordinary Colombians from government oppression. During this period, the M-19 began to further distance itself from its sometimes ally, the FARC, after an especially heinous internal purge perpetrated by a FARC offshoot, the Ricardo Franco Front, left hundreds of insurgents dead.

The final decision to demobilize came from an internal democratic vote initiated at the Santo Domingo camp, a demilitarized zone. The group had lengthy discussions and debates, sometimes augmented by outside visitors. The final vote for demobilization was cast by 227 of the 230 M-19 members present. The decision to demobilize required that the M-19 adapt how it framed its utility to those it wanted to serve and also to adapt how it framed its struggle. As part of its transition, the M-19 shifted its narrative from targeting the military, which were after all conscripted ordinary Colombians, to the “oligarchy.” It adopted the slogan, “Life for the nation, peace for the armed forces, and war against the oligarchy.” It was also careful to characterize its transition as a continuation of struggle by other means, not a military defeat. As one former M-19 described:

This process was not the product of a military defeat. . . . Due to the current reality of armed confrontation in Colombia, of its degradation, its barbaric and institutional character, the value of and justification for abandoning arms is reaffirmed.¹⁴⁸

Ultimately, the M-19 was successful in demobilizing its ranks, even if it failed to prosper as a political party.

Resistance movements use narratives in a variety of ways to help them execute key functions needed to achieve their political goals. Throughout this work, we analyze how groups use narratives to overcome the problem of collective action. However, it is important for the Special Operations Forces practitioner to understand how a narrative strategy can shift throughout the life cycle of a resistance movement. The functional demands of a nascent movement are much different than those of a mature organization. We examine how several insurgent groups varied their narrative strategy to meet changing internal and external circumstances.

LIMITS OF NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Measuring the Effectiveness of Narratives

Those who design and implement narratives face significant obstacles when it comes to assessing the effectiveness of their efforts. Methodologically speaking, it is difficult to isolate a group's narratives as the causal factor of the group's success in achieving its strategic goals. This difficulty arises from the potential presence of confounding variables that might better account for the effects thought to result from a group's strategic communication. Moreover, although narratives are an important component of a group's mobilization and other strategies, narratives have limitations. A carefully crafted narrative in and of itself cannot mobilize a population in the absence of other crucial variables, such as resource mobilization and political opportunities. In this section, we discuss these limitations and review basic strategies Special Operations Forces practitioners can use to help determine the effectiveness of narratives.

As mentioned in the "Structure and Components of Persuasive Narratives" section, neuroscience remains at the level of identifying correlations through carefully designed experiments focusing on observable, measurable behavior. In many cases, researchers have not yet progressed to reliably identifying causal relationships between narrative elements and changes in behavior. Part of the challenge of determining causal relationships is measuring the effectiveness of narratives. There are numerous impediments to gaining such data in samples of sufficient size to establish such reliable relationships. The research community continues to work on solutions to this challenge.

Obtaining Raw Data

It is important to note that the research referenced in this study was performed in controlled settings in sophisticated laboratories. In these environments it is relatively easy to gather data. Instrumentation, research staff, and study participants are in the same facility. In addition, everyone has a shared understanding of the purpose of gathering the data. The data that are most useful to researchers and practitioners, however, exist outside of laboratories and controlled settings, in the real world. Many of the target audiences of operationally relevant narratives reside halfway across the world in communities that are not necessarily friendly to being surveyed. Accordingly, it is difficult in some instances to obtain raw data on the impact of narratives. Even if researchers or operators devise ways to obtain data, there remain significant obstacles to measuring the effectiveness of narratives. Direct and indirect measurement opportunities may be available and appropriate for a given operational circumstance including a narrative. Planning the measurement strategy at the time the narrative is created is critical to advancing data collection to assess the narrative's efficacy.

What Data Are Needed?

Before methods are devised to obtain data, practitioners need to determine which data need to be obtained. Measures of effectiveness for narratives are lacking, and at least two significant obstacles need to be overcome to develop such measures. Any measure of effectiveness will need to distinguish between the impact of a narrative and the impact of the myriad other influences and circumstances surrounding individuals' behavioral choices. Narratives are only one influence on an individual outside of a controlled lab setting, and researchers and practitioners measuring effectiveness will need to delineate between actions taken because of narratives and actions taken because of other influences, such as need or desire for monetary gain. This assumes that such delineation is possible, when in fact it is likely that individuals' actions are driven by a combination of these and other influences. However, measuring the effectiveness of a narrative on behavior requires knowing it was the narrative that led to the behavior. Otherwise, it is only conjecture to assert that behavioral change occurred because of a strategic narrative.

Additionally, it is crucial to define what constitutes success for a narrative. Each narrative has its own aim, but in the context of countering violent non-state actors, there are multiple possible definitions of success. Narrative success could mean the target audience ceases actions

against US interests. Perhaps transforming violent non-state actors into inactive discontents constitutes success. Or, a narrative could be considered effective only when it causes a violent non-state actor to turn 180 degrees and not only stop violent acts against US interests but also start acting in favor of US interests. Or finally, maybe success is achieved when anti-US violent non-state actors redirect their violent actions against other groups and their interests. The same issue will unfold for the aim of any narrative, and the solution may be to redefine success with each narrative campaign or instance of messaging. In any case, measuring the effectiveness of narratives to change behavior requires being able to define what constitutes success, failure, and neutral results in between.

Current Approaches^r

Narrative practitioners at the Department of State's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications revealed that there are methods for gathering limited data. For instance, social networking platforms have enabled operators to track exposure to narratives. An operator can look at the number of "likes" a piece of narrative receives on Facebook or how many times it has been shared on the social networking site. Additionally, an operator can track how many times a tweet on Twitter is retweeted. However, these data provide only an indication of exposure because Facebook likes, Facebook shares, and Twitter retweets indicate only frequency and do not provide substantive content illustrating the audience's reaction. However, these functions were designed to indicate positive attitude toward the content, so it can be inferred that the higher their frequency, the greater approval the message is receiving.

To gauge the impact of a narrative, a Special Operations Forces practitioner can also examine the adversary's response. For instance, the mere response of an adversary is an initial indication that the narrative had an impact, whether positive or negative. The narrative caused enough concern that the adversary expended resources to respond.

Furthermore, practitioners can look at the content of the response and determine which elements of the narrative bothered or worried the adversary the most. This can provide clues to highlight which elements should be continued or enhanced because they resonate with the target audience. However, a clever adversary might also focus its response on the elements it is least concerned with to trick the narrative's author

^r The ARIS authors thank the US Department of State's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications for sharing the research and findings described in this section.

into investing resources in those elements at the expense of the truly effective elements.

Finally, the degree of response can tell the practitioner how bothersome, and therefore effective, a narrative is in the eyes of the adversary. Conventional logic dictates that the more resources an adversary expends to respond to a narrative, the more damaging the adversary believes the narrative is to its campaign. Yet, this also presents an opportunity to deceive the operator by suggesting a narrative is effective when in fact it is not. The goal of such deception would be to encourage the narrative's author to produce similar messaging because it is ineffective and in fact not worrisome, thereby taking resources away from other narrative efforts that might be more effective. At some point, however, the cost of producing such a deception outweighs the value, so these deception operations would likely be limited. The lesson remains that an adversary's response to a narrative can inform an operator about the adversary's concerns, which elements of the narrative resonate with the target audience, and how effective the narrative might have been.

A possible measure that would provide more fidelity in assessing whether a narrative is effective is a call to action. A call to action refers to an instruction in the narrative to take a particular course of conduct. The Get Out the Vote campaign of the 1990s is one example. This campaign engaged various media to instruct people to vote in elections. The designers of this campaign were able to measure the effectiveness of their messaging by tracking increases in voter turnout. Similarly, there are various public health campaigns focused on vaccinating at-risk populations against disease. The creators can determine the effectiveness of their messaging by counting how many people heed their advice and report to the clinic for vaccination.

Calls to action, however, do not provide a perfect measure of effectiveness because some of those who engage in the desired conduct may do so because they have been told to do so by others who saw the message. This can artificially inflate the number of people influenced by the message. Additionally, calls to action may not be well suited for the context of resistance movements. One difficulty is determining the action that the narrative's author would call on the target population to take. Another challenge is that the audience might agree with the narrative but still might not take the requested action because the adversary poses too great a danger. Although calls to action can tell operators a lot about what is effective in a narrative and with whom, they may be difficult to execute in the context of insurgencies or other manifestations of resistance movements.

Public Health Campaigns and Effective Messaging

What is effective messaging? In the operational context, effective messaging, including narratives, is designed to achieve a specific outcome (i.e., a persuasive narrative), and that outcome should be measurable. Measuring strategic and tactical outcomes may not be easy or obvious in the operational setting. Both direct and indirect effects may offer sufficient options to predict the likelihood that a narrative will achieve its purpose or confirm the efficacy of a narrative that has been deployed.

Factors influencing behaviors are multiple and complex. We know from social science and neuroscience disciplines that individual differences and environmental influences interact to yield a change in behavior (if there is one) in response to persuasive messaging. How then do we determine whether a message achieves the purpose for which it was created or designed? There is little predictive validity in recipients' self-reported accounts of how they perceive messages, how they have processed messages, or how they intend to act in response to messages. People cannot always describe why or how they have particular thoughts, perceptions, or feelings. Furthermore, there is a substantial disconnect between self-reported intention to act and actual behavioral outcome (i.e., having taken action). Given the limitations of self-reporting, how do we proceed to understand, construct, and measure persuasive messages?

Objective measurement approaches, such as those found in neuroscience, can complement what can be learned from social science approaches. Specifically, to overcome concerns related to self-reporting methodologies, we can gain additional insight from considering the neural response to persuasive messaging in real time. Understanding the underlying mechanisms may be one way to predict behavioral change in response to operationally relevant persuasive messaging.

In this manner, a neuroscientific approach can help us understand the complex cognitive processes involved in attention, memory, decision making, and discrimination. For example, certain brain regions are activated when people rate a message as persuasive, in contrast to when they rate a message as not persuasive.¹⁴⁹ These regions are similar to those that are activated when people engage in mentalizing (undertaking the mental processes of making sense of each other and ourselves) and perspective taking (understanding other people's thoughts, feelings, and motivations). Messages that have been specifically tailored to an individual or group with similar characterization or motivation (e.g., voters of a specific political party, age bracket, and socioeconomic status, or history of making political campaign contributions) have been

shown to have a greater impact on behavior than messages created for a general audience.¹⁵⁰ This is not particularly surprising. In further study, brain areas associated with self-referential processing were activated in response to tailored messages as compared to the decreased activation observed in response to general messages. Self-referential processing means that in response to individual-targeted messaging, the participants personally evaluated their intentions and goals with respect to the messaging.¹⁵¹

The message source also contributes to the persuasive process. Generally, expert sources delivering the message are more persuasive than nonexpert sources. Researchers have shown that brain areas associated with semantic elaboration, memory formation, and trust are activated when engaging with a message delivered by a perceived expert source. These findings indicate that attention to the source of the message (in terms of the messenger's expertise) may have implications on attitudes about and memory of the persuasive message.¹⁵²

Recently, marketing, economics, and communication disciplines have also used a neuroscientific approach to delve more deeply into the product–consumer relationship, economic exchanges, and the efficacy of public health messaging. Public service announcements (PSAs) are a key component in the public health tool kit for delivering persuasive health messages via mass media. The ultimate purpose of these messages is to change the public's health behaviors.

Research in health communications clearly demonstrates the attributes of a persuasive message: a neuroscientific measurement and a measurable outcome. It is a context in which validity to predict both short- and long-term behavioral change may be determined as a result of the narrative's clinical relevance and the audience's engagement with the health care system.¹⁵³ For example, increased activation in the prefrontal cortex (a key decision-making area of the brain) predicted increased use of sunscreen in study participants one week after they were exposed to persuasive messaging concerning sun exposure. Importantly, the neural activation pattern predicted an additional 23 percent of the variability in behavior above participants' self-reported intention and attitudes about sunscreen.

A number of researchers have also examined the value of anti-smoking campaigns to determine whether there are real reductions in tobacco use in response to anti-smoking persuasive messages. Researchers imaged the brains of smokers while the smokers watched anti-smoking PSAs. The researchers also asked the participants about their intentions to reduce their tobacco use after having watched the messages.¹⁵⁴ Activation in the prefrontal cortex explained 20 percent of the variance in exhaled carbon monoxide levels (a biological indicator

of recent tobacco smoking) one month after the initial testing and self-reported intention to quit. These findings suggest that the brain activation pattern may be a marker to predict future reduction in tobacco use.

These findings illustrate that an objective measure of behavior is a better predictor of behavioral change than the audience's self-reported intention. Along this line of inquiry, Wang et al. examined anti-smoking PSAs to confirm the relationship between brain activation patterns and behavioral outcomes in order to try to determine the features of the PSA that were most effective in changing smokers' behavior.¹⁵⁵ Brains of smokers who were not seeking treatment were imaged (using functional magnetic resonance imaging) while the smokers viewed a number of PSAs that were considered to have both strong and weak arguments (e.g., risks of cancer and other disease were considered strong arguments, whereas yellowed teeth and bad breath were considered weak arguments) and differing levels of sensationalism (e.g., disturbing pictures of smokers in ill health versus pictures of actors smoking in popular movies). The researchers' findings indicated that a number of brain regions were activated by a combination of the strength and the sensationalism of the PSA content. One specific brain area predicted the smokers' urine cotinine levels (the gold-standard biological marker of nicotine use in the preceding three to five days) one month after smokers watched the PSAs. That is, the higher the activation in this brain area, the lower the cotinine level at the one-month follow-up (indicating a reduction in nicotine use). Interestingly, this brain area, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, is associated with self-referential and internally focused attention. As illustrated in the other examples, the predictive strength of the relationship between the brain and the smokers' behavior was greater than that of the relationship between the smokers' self-reported intention to quit and their behavior.

Including the neuroscientific findings from public health/communication studies of persuasive messages is relevant to this discussion. These findings illustrate the relevance of a neuroscientific approach to understanding underlying mechanisms of persuasive messages and the importance of objective outcome measures to determine the predictive validity of persuasive messages. Through these examples, we have illustrated that persuasive messages can effect real, measurable behavior change. Certainly, a neuroscientific approach and certain measurement strategies are not practical for the operational setting. Their utility is in determining and validating the features of effective, persuasive messages and encouraging the community to plan for and measure the efficacy of messages.

The Gray Box

Finally, it is important to recall that humans are not always able to explain the reasons for their actions. People will rationalize their actions and express what they believe was their motivation for taking an action, but neuroscience has progressed enough to demonstrate that humans do not report their motivations accurately. As an example, economics has relied on the premise that humans are rational actors in their decision making. Neuroscientists have discovered that the emotional centers of the brain play a much larger role in decision-making than rational-actor theory would suggest. In light of this, any measurement of a narrative's effectiveness cannot rely on the audience reporting its reasons for acting. The human brain remains a gray box about which we understand a great deal—but about which there is still much to learn. Accordingly, neuroscientific insights into narratives must be received with recognition that they do not come from reading a person's mind. These insights reveal useful connections and elucidate the processes at play, but they do not yet provide definitive answers on how individuals interact with narratives.

CONCLUSION

The power of narratives has been recognized for millennia. Yet, in our modern world, it is only now that we are beginning an in-depth exploration into how narratives impact individual decision making and, ultimately, our actions. Because in part, the study of politics, such as the dynamics of resistance movements, is a study of the interaction of beliefs, decisions, and action, the use of narratives as a starting point for analysis is crucial.

One of the first challenges is confronting the level of ambiguity in the concept of narratives. The term is broadly used in different contexts for different purposes. Here, we have broken down narratives into three interrelated concepts. First, narrative is used to describe processes in human cognition. In short, people often think in story form. Without this narrative structure filling in missing or opaque information, our ability to interpret and attribute meaning in our lives would be hindered. This is especially important when filling in information gaps related to the invisible inner mental landscapes of people and groups, such as motivations and intentions.

Second, narrative is also used to describe the artifacts of our cognitive processes. Because we think in stories, we produce many of them. Some are as simple as the story surrounding our morning commute.

Others emerge in richer cultural forms, such as myths, epics, visual art, and dance.

Lastly, narrative is also used to describe individuals' and groups' strategic, rhetorical use of this accumulated cultural material to influence and persuade audiences. Resistance movements use this form of strategic communication to overcome the manifold problems of mobilizing people to collective action. In this work, we have talked about how all three of these related ways of thinking about narratives are important for Special Operations Forces practitioners to consider.

It is clear that not all narrative artifacts are equal, although most do share some common elements. In terms of its emotive power, a story recounting our morning commute, for instance, cannot usually compete with a story of a master storyteller like Leo Tolstoy. To more carefully analyze strategic communication, a good definition of narrative is necessary to separate the variety of narratives most commonly used for strategic purposes. For the purposes of this work, we identified a narrative as a coherent set of interrelated stories that inspires its audience to resolve a conflict through the use of various literary or rhetorical forms. Scholars also distinguish between level I and level II narratives to account for the significant differences in quality, with level I narratives recounting simple events and level II narratives depicting deep complexity. Narratives that are used for the purposes of strategic communication are generally of the more complex level II variety.

Others have identified master narratives, or deeply ingrained stories. Master narratives describe a series of interconnected stories that serve as the blueprint for most of a society's other stories. These narratives influence the beliefs, values, and norms in a society. Most often, such artifacts are constructed and reinterpreted within a society over generations and not necessarily for some specific strategic purpose. Master and other narratives are not static; the ability to reassess and reinterpret these powerful narratives gives resistance movements the opportunity to shape them for their particular purposes. When skillfully manipulated, master narratives can be used persuasively.

There are many bodies of research that touch on narratives and their use in strategic communication. Research in communication, political science, sociology, and, to a lesser extent, psychology tells us a great deal about group dynamics and narratives, giving the Special Operations Forces practitioner tools and frameworks useful for analyzing and developing persuasive messages. One such framework, the process of vertical integration, is a good model for thinking about how resistance movements can make master narratives relevant for local populations. Vertical integration describes how resistance movements

craft persuasive messages by connecting local and personal narratives with the master narratives of the targeted society.

Likewise, in social movement theory, researchers use the concept of framing to explain how social movements are able to successfully mobilize their audiences. Successful groups use a wide array of framing tools that distill complex information about the world into actionable components. The trio of collective action frames—the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames—together help persuade an audience that there is a problem, a solution to the problem, and a need to do something about it.

Another body of research in this field focuses on narratives through the lens of the myth-symbol complex. In this framework, scholars study how emotive symbols are used to consolidate group identity and promote collective action. All groups with cohesive identities develop myth-symbol complexes composed of myths, memories, values, and the like that together separate the group from others outside it. More specifically, each of these complexes contains a mythomoteur, a kernel that constitutes the core of group identity. Mythomoteurs exert a powerful pull on the consciousness of their adherents. When group identity is threatened, these mythomoteurs form potent tools to motivate extreme self-sacrifice for the good of the community, such as taking up arms, killing others, and risking death.

In contrast to the group dynamics approach of the social sciences, neuroscientists, psychologists, and others look for the biological foundations of narratives at the level of individuals. This research, although limited, provides insights into the causal relationship between narratives and observable changes in human behavior. Much of this research benefits from experimental design lacking in other fields. From this research, scientists have identified some key elements of a persuasive narrative. This research has shown that invoking different systems of information processing, whether heuristic or systematic, can lead to more predictable outcomes. Developing the trust of an audience also increases susceptibility of the audience to the narrative and decreases the likelihood of a violent response.

It is not surprising that another key element is the persuasive effectiveness of imagery. In part because they incur lower cognitive burdens, images produce more rapid, emotional reactions than textual and verbal stimuli alone. Likewise, responses to textual and verbal stimuli are liable to be more rational and conscious than responses to imagery.

Narratives that detail struggles involving religious or ethnic identity are likely to invoke strong responses. Neuroscientific research explains the biology of these virulent reactions to threats to sacred values, which are sacrosanct beliefs that adherents would not be willing

to compromise for reasons of utility, such as monetary gain. Research has shown that different parts of the brain are used to process issues of morality than for making cost–benefit evaluations. This presents difficulties in crafting narratives, because attempts to alter sacred values are usually met with strong fight-or-flight instincts, much as if the person had been physically threatened.

Lastly, anyone who has lost track of his or her surroundings while deeply engrossed in a book or a movie has experienced the power of transportation. The term describes the immersive experience of being psychologically transported to the world of the narrative. In this state, the audience empathizes with the characters, constructing vivid imagery of the events and surroundings of the narrative while being blind to cues from the real world. The persuasive power of transportation lies in the emotive, not the cognitive, centers. In other words, we are not transported because the story is true or rational but rather because it is simply a good story. We are most likely to be transported by stories that have characters we can identify with, an imaginable plot, and a likeness to the world as we understand it.

As this work has demonstrated, there is substantial research to guide the Special Operations Forces practitioner in countering and crafting persuasive narratives. Despite the promise of this research, no one, as of yet, has constructed a foolproof “recipe” for crafting persuasive narratives that will work for all people in all places. Indeed, scholars are divided on whether this is even possible. Some maintain that the only way to persuade and influence is through the application of deep knowledge of the local culture and people. In other words, all persuasive methods are specific to the individual or culture. Others, such as those conducting the research discussed in this work, believe that it is possible to build a good model as a starting point for strategic communication. However, it is clear that the communities studying narratives have much work to do in before they will be able to identify which narratives, and which components of those narratives, are responsible for changes in behavior according to the expected outcomes.

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